**Forgiveness Doesn’t Taste Like This**

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/31281920.

| | |
|---|---|
| Rating: | Explicit |
| Archive Warning: | Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings |
| Categories: | F/M, M/M |
| Fandoms: | The Grisha Trilogy - Leigh Bardugo, Shadow and Bone (TV) |
| Relationships: | Ivan/Alina Starkov, The Darkling | Aleksander Morozova/Alina Starkov, Ivan/Fedyor Kaminsky |
| Characters: | Alina Starkov, Ivan (The Grisha Trilogy), The Darkling | Aleksander Morozova |
| Additional Tags: | Character Death, Angst, Dark, Depression, Grief/Mourning, Unhealthy Relationships, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, long timeline, Immortality, losing loved ones, Self-Hatred, Pining, Alina Loses Mal, Violence, Amplifiers and immortality, Alina's powers used against her will, Dystopia, AU - The Darkling Wins, enemies to something else, Healing, Sexual Tension, Dreams and Nightmares, Heartrending Stuff, Slow Burn, Ivanlina, Ivan & Alina love to bicker, living life outside the Little Palace, Rough Sex, Multiple Orgasms, Frottage, Jealousy, Explicit Sexual Content, Power Dynamics, Love/Hate, Self-Harm, Oral Sex, Explicit Language, Possessive Behavior, dark themes, Gratuitous Smut, Dirty Talk, Dysfunctional Love Triangles, Heavy Plot, Semi-Public Sex, Deepthroating, Heavy Emotions |
| Language: | English |
| Series: | Part 1 of Finding Forgiveness in the Dark, Without a Light |
| Stats: | Published: 2021-05-14 Completed: 2021-07-30 Words: 142,907 Chapters: 13/13 |

# Forgiveness Doesn’t Taste Like This

by EvilPeaches

Summary


Being amplified, the way they are, means more than just being powerful.

It means watching everyone you love *die*.


---

The dystopian fic where the Darkling wins and successfully uses Alina's powers to weaponize the Fold for years. Until finally, when 'peace' arrives, he allows her the freedom to leave his side once more. Only, she's not allowed to go alone. Which is a problem.

Notes

**Disclaimer:** I don't own the characters or the Grisha Trilogy. Those are Leigh Bardugo's lovely creations.

**AN:** Okay, so first off, this is where I unveil my true colors and write some really dark, uncomfortably angsty shit. This thing has been bouncing around in my head, mostly because I love writing the bad guys winning and putting characters through struggle. ***One theme of this is around the idea of, 'what if the Stag never came to Alina to help her take back her own power?'*** At least for now o.O
There are absolutely character deaths in this fic. There are a lot of themes of dealing with grief in terrible ways, between Ivan and Alina, who are both amplified Grisha, per canon. I'm sticking with the whole 'amplified brings longevity and long life, slow aging' theme for these two in this. Which is the heart of some of their problems.

**Alina is characterized in a very dark, unpleasant place in this first chapter. This is done on purpose. If this makes you nervous, just know that she grows and changes throughout the entire story...and this is a long story. It's a journey and an emotional ride. There are ups and downs all over.

**Pairing Notes:** I order pairings in order of general relevancy to the story. Yes, there are themes of past Mal/Alina. Yes, there is going to be **a LOT** of Ivan/Alina in this, but not in the first chapter if that terrifies you. Yes, there are themes of Ivan/Fedyor throughout this story. Yes, there is some dark dark dark Darklina in this, be warned, it features much later in the fic, though it pops up throughout, much like Ivan/Fedyor.
This is a dark, angsty fic that spans many many many years. However! The second chapter certainly lightens up a bit, being much less dark. This first chapter is the most tough. The very explicit stuff is in later chapters, as a forewarning.

# Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*You think it's broken, too proud to let it show*
*But if it's broken*
*Why is it still beating?*
*You've cut through your veins*
*You've cut through your heart and soul*
*You're feeling dead but your heart still beats*

*"Silence is Everything" - Icon & The Black Roses*

---

For the longest time, Alina believes that the Darkling *actually thinks* time will soften her towards him. Even after all his secrets, all the ways he's twisted her up inside. Even after the stag, even after revealing his true purpose for the Fold to her.

Even after all of this, somehow he still believes his relationship with her is salvageable. That eventually, she will come to an understanding with him. That maybe she will forgive him, even.

*If he believes time will fix what he's done, he better be prepared to wait forever*, Alina thinks bitterly.

Even though she's now stationed in the Little Palace, locked in her suite that's more like a golden cage, Alina is plagued with nightmares of the Fold. She can't get over how it feels, no longer being fully in control of her own power, knowing that it belongs to the Darkling now.

She's never felt more like a failure than now. Powerless. Controlled by someone else. She's a bird without wings. A songbird that can only sing when it's told to. A performing monkey, kept only for Aleksander's pleasure.

The Grisha themselves have become split parties; those that whole-heartedly side with the Darkling and his quest to weaponize the Fold to protect Grisha and their standing for all time- and the side that keeps their mouth shut.

Alina doesn't keep her mouth shut, not exactly, but she doesn't blame those that don't speak out against him. Even if there are plenty of Grisha that do not support this absolute madness, Grisha who want to see the end of the Fold, there is nothing they can do against the Darkling.

He is simply too powerful, made even more so with Alina as his latest acquisition.

The nations surrounding them are all in danger now; no one is safe from Aleksander's wrath. He makes his stance known to dignitaries, Alina by his side, dolled up in her finest, the antlers of the stag still visible, cruel reminders of what he's done to her.

There are leaders who stand against him.

Alina is there when he crushes their cities, moving the Fold over them like a wave of death and despair. The tearing feeling in her soul burns every time he uses her light. In her mind, all she can hear are the screams of women and children, defenseless, innocent, as darkness descends upon them...and the monsters in the darkness.

She wants to cry with them. She doesn't want to be the reason for their demise. She's been made into some *unholy thing* and it's worse than anything she could have ever imagined, even in her worst dreams.

"You'll forgive me, one day," Aleksander tells her calmly, always so self-assured. "You haven't lived as long as I have. You haven't seen the dangers that the Grisha have faced-"

"You can dress this up any way you want," she replies, trying to be numb to his touch, trying to pretend she didn't once fall for his charm oh so easily. Like a simple girl, desperate for attention. In need of affection. "You are murdering innocent people and calling it justice for the Grisha. I will never forgive what you have done to me. Never."

He is beautiful as the night, Aleksander is. His smile is thin, barely there. Like a ghost, an apparition. His fingers drift through her hair and he says, "Never is a long time, Alina. I'm not sure you understand how patience works, when you have eternity to wait."

"I'm well aware of what 'never' means and *I mean it*."

Still, as the moon in the midnight sky, the Darkling examines her carefully, measuring her words. "You are still young," he says finally, eyes dancing over her features. "In time, you will-"

"You said you would let me destroy it," she interrupts, not wanting to give him a chance to sway her with his lovely words. He's twisted her up into knots so many times before, even made her believe that she loved him. Maybe she did. Maybe she still *does*. Maybe a part of her will love him *forever*, even if it curdles her blood. "What you're doing…this *can't* go on forever."

She'll break if it does.

The Darkling brushes hair from her face with a gentle hand. "Who says it can't? I have brought peace for our people. Peace must be *maintained*. All the world will know that the Grisha cannot be trifled with. We have the Fold."

With horror, she stares up at him. Her soul feels very tired. "You mean to never stop this." She sobs as his arms go around her, like strands of inky midnight. "You've made me into a m-monster." His lips brush her forehead and she tries to cringe away, hating herself, hating what he's *done to her*.

Worst of all, she hates that his kiss doesn't taste like poison.

"You don't have to be the monster," he says against her throat as she trembles in his arms. "That's my job. You can remain the golden angel and I can play the demon that everyone fears."

---

The decline of her humanity begins slowly, but if she were to pinpoint the exact moment, she would have to say it truly began with the execution of Mal Oretsev.

---

In the beginning, in a false show of mercy, the Darkling had allowed Mal to live, though Alina is well aware he only did it to appease her. It's done to make it seem like Aleksander's trying to bend, to be some sort of charitable dark lord of the land. That he won't kill the man she loves. That he won't destroy her oldest friend.

It's folly, because Mal isn't so easily set aside. He doesn't so easily accept Alina being made into a cog in the Darkling's war effort.

It's only a few years in to his dominion of the continent, but the Darkling eventually comes to his own conclusion that keeping Mal alive isn't going to ever bring him into Alina's good graces. It's doing him no favors, allowing her to continue pining after the tracker.

…and so, he has him done away with, the *fourth time* that Mal tries to rescue Alina from the Little Palace.

The day the execution takes place, the sun is not shining. The clouds are heavy, casting a dreary aura over those gathered to witness Mal's end.

The former tracker, with still not a single grey hair, is chained between two posts, slumped to his knees. The Darkling stares at him with a certain anger in his gaze, perhaps thinking he has never hated a man as much as he hates this one. "This man," he says in his smooth, charismatic tone to the crowd, "Has repeatedly tried to kidnap and harm the Sun Summoner-"

"Liar! I've tried to *rescue* her," Mal snarls, spittle flying. His eyes are nearly aflame with rage as he struggles against his restraints. "You've cut her wings and *made her a slave*. You're using her."

"Silence!" The Darkling commands, darkness crawling around him, making the crowd murmur in fear. "You have been sentenced to death by the Cut. You will die with whatever dignity you still have, tracker." He says the last word mockingly.

His Corporalki flank him in their scarlet *keftas* as the Darkling slowly calls his power forth, gaze fixed upon the boy -*more a man now than years before*- who has been a thorn in his side

for far too long.

The sound of feet running, of someone shouting, sounds out through the courtyard procured for the execution. “Wait! *You can’t!* Please, Aleksander, *don’t do this*!”

The Darkling does not turn his head, though he feels a blip of pain in his chest. He had not meant for Alina to witness the end of her tracker. He can hear her running straight for him, and for a moment, he fears she will jump in front of Mal when he sets loose the Cut.

“Stop her,” Aleksander says aloud to Ivan, who is just behind him somewhere to the right. “And restrain her.”

His most loyal heartrender gives him the barest of nods, his jaw clenched as he catches hold of Alina mid stride, his arms wrapping around the Sun Summoner tightly. Alina thrashes in his grasp and the hate in her gaze is obvious, having found herself in a familiar position.

Restrained, by Ivan.

Always he plays the role of jailor to perfection, emotionlessly. She tries to knock her head back into his teeth, jumping a bit in his hold, but he is far too strong. Her struggles are for naught.

“You loathsome pig,” she hisses at him like a wildcat, hating the weakness of her body, hating that she's never strong *enough*.

“I’ve heard it all before from you, girl.” Ivan’s tone is drawling, unmoved.

Sagged worthlessly in Ivan’s arms, Alina sees Fedyor some feet away, looking at her sadly from where he stands with the other *Corporalki*. There’s a dark sorrow in his gaze and she knows that although he never supported the idea of weaponizing the Fold, he will never go against his lover.

…because Ivan is loyal to the Darkling and the Darkling is a beautiful, sly madman hellbent on ruling by fear. No matter how Alina has begged him, he will not allow her to destroy the Fold. Even if the deed would make her love him again. And she loved him, once. Deeply, and truly, when all she saw was his mask of perfection. The sweet, wounded boy. Back before she knew why lay beneath, the dark need for vengeance in his breast.

Desperate, she once again tries to plea with Aleksander, even as his power collects into shape. “I’m begging you. Spare him-”

Mal voice reaches out to her in a brave show of calm. “Alina. It’s fine. *I’m fine*. You have to let me go.”

“No, Mal-”

He grins bitterly at her, death already in his gaze. He knows what’s coming for him, can see it. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save you, Alina. I lo-”

The Cut moves.

It only takes seconds, and Alina's scream is almost delayed as Mal's head falls to the ground with a near soundless thud.

She stops breathing for a short second in time, frozen like a doe in Ivan's tight grasp, eyes wide with horror.

Then, her lungs expand rapidly and she lets out a piercing wail, sagging completely in Ivan's grasp, so much so that he releases her, allowing her to dart forward now that there is nothing she can do to change the course of events.

She ends up at the Darkling's feet, a wretched image of despair.

"If you truly loved him," Aleksander says to her as she sobs, "You would have let him go long ago and spared yourself this agony."

The agony tearing from her chest is unlike anything she's ever felt in her life. It hurts like thousands of knife wounds, like her insides are being dug out with rusty spoons. Like all her organs are being thrown into the grass, crimson and scarlet meat. Useless and rotted.

"H-how could you d-do this to me?" She gasps out, hysteria in her lungs, seizing. "You said you wouldn't h-hurt him. You *lied* to me."

His hand smooths over her hair, like a master and his favorite hound. His prized possession. "*Shhh*...Alina. You know I don't like seeing you this way. I never wish you pain. This was for the greater good. He was poisoning your mind-"

Viciously, she slaps away his hand, teeth bared even as tears fall down her face. "*Don't touch me*."

Aleksander inhales sharply, the only sign that he's displeased by her words, unamused by her theatrics. When he collects himself fully, he says, "Ivan. Please take the Sun Summoner back to her chambers. She needs rest."

"Of course." The *Corporalnik* steps forward sharply and picks her up off the ground, yanking her to her feet.

Alina cries out in pain and the Darkling says, "*Gently*, Ivan." Aleksander doesn't enjoy seeing her manhandled, though he knows that his Sun Summoner is a handful.

The look of disdain on Ivan's face is barely withheld and while he's momentarily relaxing his grip on her, she lashes out and slaps him hard across the face. Gritting his teeth, he wrangles her under control again and hauls her away from the gruesome courtyard.

"*Let me go*," Alina shouts, her voice raw as a wound. "Put me in the ground! I'd rather be buried alive than go to my room! *Put me in the ground!*"

"Enough of the dramatics," Ivan hisses tightly as she tries to beat her small fists against his chest. "What's done is done. The tracker is dead."

Across the way, with the other Corporalki, Fedyor winces slightly, hearing the cold rebuttal to Alina's clear emotional distress.

Eventually, Ivan successfully drags her into her room, throwing her within like an ill-favored toy. Alina hears the click of the lock, understanding with dismay that he's locked her inside. Face crumbling, she remains sprawled on the floor, covering her face as she weeps, digging her nails in, wanting to peel her flesh away as if it's a mask.

She cries in solitude loud enough that her throat goes raw and her eyes burn. She can barely breathe and every gasping sob hurts deep within her chest. The loss of Mal is permanent and the idea that she will never see him again is tearing her asunder.

They were never supposed to be separated. Certainly *not like this*. Not where she can't follow him.

It isn't until hours later that Fedyor comes in to put her out of her misery. His face is shaped by dismay at the sight of her current state, his voice regretful as he says, "How long have you been left like this?" He is soft and gentle as he crouches down on the ground next to her with a warm blanket, smoothing a kind hand through her mussed hair. He holds her in his arms for a bit as he slows her heartrate, convincing her to calm, to go empty of everything that's causing her pain.

Her tortured sobs wither away slowly, turning into soft, hiccupping sniffles.

She buries her face in his neck, taking what little comfort he provides. He is so giving, asking so little in return. She's always liked that about him and it never ceases to amaze her that out of anyone this man could have chosen, he chose that *awful fucking brute*, Ivan. "You have such a good heart," she tells Fedyor as he finally gets her emotions to blank out. He's made her numb and it feels wonderful. It almost feels like dying and being in love at the same time.

Fedyor sighs, squeezing her slightly. "I wish that were true."

He stays with her until she goes to sleep, dreamless.

---

---

"You're horrible to her," Fedyor whispers in the dark against his neck. "You've always been horrid to her."

Ivan's glowers at the ceiling. He'd prefer Fedyor not bring her up while they're in bed. "She's a wretched girl."

His lover sighs, the sound laced with disappointment. "She loved that boy, you know."

"Everyone is aware of that. It's not news."

Fedyor pauses, his fingers trailing over Ivan's chest, feeling the steady, unrelenting beat of his heart, familiar and beloved. "I…saw how you left her, Ivan. *That* was cruel."

“My apologies. After that vicious wildcat clawed me half to death, I was not in the mood to be charitable.”

“It’s not charity; it’s sympathy.” Fedyor sits up, looking down at him. “You realize that one day, I’m going to die and it will be before you-”

Ivan stiffens, the muscles in his body tensing. “We are not talking about that.”

“When will we talk about it? Tomorrow? In five years? Or when it’s already too late?”

The candle by the bedside flickers out, leaving only smoke to remain.

---

---

A small handful of years pass, the Fold growing ever more powerful. Nations kneel before the Darkling and his power, begging for mercy.

Sometimes he grants it; sometimes he does *not*.

At *his* side is Alina, his unwilling Summoner.

At *her* side is Ivan, her jailer.

She’s always within his sight, just so she knows that any wrong foot out of line will warrant swift punishment and correction from him. Even as the years crawl by at a snail’s pace, they remain at odds. He’s always viewed her as a disappointment, a lazy, petulant orphan with no sense of duty. She’s always viewed him as an arrogant hound, one that only does as his master commands of him, with no question.

Blindly loyal, for all the wrong damn reasons. Filled with revenge against those that wiped out his family, all those years ago, and filled with bitter prejudice against the non-Grisha. These are things that Alina can never understand and she doesn’t want to.

Like the Darkling, she and Ivan do not age by much, at least not visibly. Their lifelines have slowed immeasurably with their powerful amplifiers, and perhaps the passing of time only becomes more painfully visible as those around them begin to grey.

“How do you manage it?” Alina asks Fedyor one afternoon, staring out at the dark forest, just beyond the Little Palace. She wishes she could run into it, become lost to time and civilization.

“What do you mean?” He’s still very handsome, despite the slight lines by his eyes and the fine streaks of grey appearing in his midnight hair.

“The fact that you’re aging and he’s *not*.”

Ivan is a touchy subject between them. Fedyor knows there is no love lost between Alina and his longtime lover. He looks down at his hands and a sorrowful noise creeps from between

his lips. “I’ve accepted it for what it is. He’s had an amplifier for a very long time, Alina. I’ve known what it means. He’s pretending he doesn’t, naturally.” He smiles wryly. “But, I don’t need to live forever. I’m so tired of war. Of the threat of war.”

“That’s not really what I’m asking.”

He glances at her out of the corner of his eye. Still, even now, he can make her heart beat a little faster with just a simple look. “I’ll say it this way then. And- you’re not going to like it. I think you should be glad that you never had to watch your tracker live long enough to grow old.”

Alina feels her heart seize at that, anger and old wounds opening. Like a scar being cut open and having fingers dug into it, searing and obscene. Visceral in its agony. “You’re right.” She stands up. “How *dare* you say that to me. I would have rather watched Mal grow old and die peacefully, than what *really* happened to him.”

She stands up and storms away, a storm cloud of rage hovering about her.

“Alina!” Fedyor calls after her apologetically. “Wait. Don’t be mad at me! I’m just being honest.”

She pauses, going stock still before she says over her shoulder at him, “I’m not mad at you. I could never be mad at *you*. I’m mad at *everything*.”

And, it’s true. She’s mad at the cards she’s been dealt in this life. She hates what fate has done to her. She hates how her soul has darkened with bitterness, with the lives of hundreds on her shoulders. All the people who die because of her. She's so weary of it all.

The anger burns deep. So deep that she's sure it will burn until there is nothing left inside of her.

---

---

Genya appears sometimes, to make Alina presentable. These are usually on nights that the Darkling will require Alina’s presence in his quarters.

“How can you still defend him,” Alina utters to her with a voice emptier than a used bottle of wine. “After all that he’s done.”

Fixing her hair, brightening her lips, darkening her eyes, Genya goes through the motions. She’s hiding her wrinkles well, the ones around her eyes. Her forehead is lined now and it seems she can’t hide those stubborn marks there from her expressive eyebrows.

Alina thinks it’s nice that at least Genya gets to age and die, all while Alina is doomed to be this…this damn symbol forever. To be *his* forever.

Genya looks down, examines her manicured fingers. Examines Alina’s not so perfect ones. “He is making the world better for Grisha. People would have wanted us burned at the stake

before. Now, few want to challenge us."

"You think what he's done is worth some safety?" Alina scoffs. "Why do I even bother asking you anymore?"

Looking hurt, Genya bites her lip. "I don't know, Alina. I only do as he tells me. He means well…where you are concerned. Despite all this, he truly feels for you-"

"Whatever he feels for me is a dark, loathsome thing," Alina replies sharply. "I don't want it."

…and she doesn't, even when she presents herself in Aleksander's chambers, even when his lips glide across her cheekbones. Even as her body responds, because in the end she belongs to him and in the privacy of his chambers he treats her like the goddess that everyone claims she is.

Despite all this, she'd prefer to be destroyed, because the anger in her heart wants to burn her alive from the inside out.

She wants to be consumed.

---

---

It's just short of eight years later when Fedyor leaves on an assignment in Fjerda.

He returns in a coffin.

The funeral is well attended, for Fedyor was well loved. His loss is felt deep and Alina finds herself sobbing alone in an empty room, unable to come to terms with the fact that yet another person she has found to be a valuable companion…is gone. Forever.

She'll never hear his charming laugh again. She'll never see that perfect smile, the twinkle in his dark eyes that always speaks of mischief. She won't feel the way his heartrending can be soft, the way he's eased her sorrow, softened her misery on the days she needed it most.

She'll even miss the sound of his voice, smooth and easy. Alina hates that she's been trying to not see him getting older, a little slower in the field, not quite a strong as he used to be. Not as alert. Which is how a Fjerdan knife found its mark in his heart.

When she has mourned until her tears taste like ash, she turns her bitterness to someone else. Someone more deserving of her pain. She returns to the funeral site, where now there is only one mourner remaining in the dark. If he notices her, he is too far in his own misery to care or notice.

Alina watches Ivan, like a thirsty lion watching a watering hole. She counts the cracks in his armor, reads the defeat in the proud line of his shoulders. The despair that he tries to hide, written in his empty gaze. She knows this pain; *she's felt it before*. She remembers how callously he treated her when Mal was executed. Her teeth grind together and she feels

slightly unhinged, a red and cruel thing growing inside of her. Maybe she's coming undone. Maybe her soul has finally unraveled.

Her mind makes the right leaps, coming to the conclusion that he is weakened now. She can push him to the edge and force his hand. Maybe this is her moment to push him to the edge of finally making the last final mistake.

Maybe she can finally push him into crushing her heart so she can escape this eternal life of horror and misery.

Ivan is the only one with the balls to do what she wants, but he's always held back. He's always had something to lose. Now…now he *doesn't*.

She makes her move, while there is no one to witness. Ivan is a lone figure in the rain, his head bowed, shoulders tight. He crouches down and his forehead rests again the coffin. He stifles a gasp.

Even if her own heart twists for the loss of Fedyor's smiling, sunny demeanor, only anger and bitterness courses inside of Alina. "And now," she says as she comes to stand next to Ivan. "*Now* you know how it feels."

"*Leave*." His voice is tight.

"He deserved better than you," she says, walking straight into danger, embracing it. Seeking an end to her mournful existence. He's a weapon and she intends to use him as she sees fit. "I never could quite figure out what he saw in you."

"Bite your forked tongue, Sun Summoner." His tone is darker, more dangerous. Like a wounded animal.

"What's this?" She goads above the sound of rain pouring around them. "You don't want to *hear the truth*? The way he never supported your cause with Aleksander? How he never supported this endless war with *everyone*?"

His stands up and spins to face her, precise and dangerous. Ivan's eyes are like midnight pits of rage and pain and this is everything Alina has been looking for. It's almost courteous that he even bothers to warn her off a third time. "If you value your life, you will back off, *now*."

Alina feels an ugly smile shape her lips. That's the thing. She doesn't value it anymore. This is the greatest version of self-harm she can imagine.

Leaning closer to him, she places the final verbal knife, the most awful thing she can possibly conjure. "Once it became clear that you'd support the Darkling in weaponizing the Fold, I wonder what ran out first; Fedyor's respect or his blind love for you."

With a snarl, Ivan lunges for her and Alina ducks out of the way, calling what little power she can to singe the back of his *kefta*, knowing he'll feel its heat. She nearly burns through it when he turns and gets her with a hard right hook that sends her backwards.

*He hits like a damn sledgehammer,* she finds herself thinking dazedly. Copper fills her mouth.

“You speak of disappointment like you aren’t the biggest one the Grisha have ever seen,” he hisses hatefully, teeth bared. “Ever since the very beginning, you’ve been the worst dissatisfaction there ever was.”

“Well,” she pauses to spit some blood. “It takes one to know one, I suppose.” Then, she lunges at him again, slamming her fist into his gut.

His hand tangles in her wet hair and he throws her away from him, clutching at his side briefly. Alina's face burns where he struck her and the pain fills the emptiness inside of her, and yet it’s *not enough*. The empty holes inside of her cannot ever be filled.

They go hand-to-hand with bruising force, but Alina already knows she is no physical match for him. He’s strong, built powerfully, a skilled killer even without his heartrending. When she switches to using her own small science, that’s when they truly try to murder each other. As she intended.

He’s fast, always been a skilled combatant. It’s why *he’s the best*. It’s why he’s always been the one beside her, guarding her. Simultaneously protecting and jailing her since the very beginning all those years ago. Alina thinks this is a fitting end to their saga. Just as she raises her hands, burning with light, he’s already got his grip on her heart.

She can feel it, as if his calloused hand is literally inside her chest. A certain sort of pressure, the way it gets suddenly hard to breathe, as if there is no room in her ribcage.

“Do it,” she grits out. “*I want you to*.”

Ivan pauses, still if only for a moment. His grip on her heart is excruciating, but somehow, she manages to give him a bloody grin. “Take it,” she demands of him. “Take my heart out, Ivan. *I don’t need it anymore*. Come on, you heartless monster. What’s stopping you now? Come on. Fedyor won’t ever know. *He’d dead, remember*?”

It’s cruel and she needs it to be. She can’t continue living this life as a tool of Aleksander’s tyranny. She’s reached the end of this road. Maybe she’s finally lost it, she’s lost her mind and that’s *fine*.

She sees the moment that Ivan decides it just might be worth the risk to end her life. That ending the life of the Darkling’s beloved Sun Summoner no longer holds meaning to him. A sick sort of euphoria is born inside of her as she sees him make his choice, hell in his dark gaze.

Alina’s death is finally staring her in the face, after all these empty years of horror and shame.

He moves his outstretched hand, his resolve firm. A physical pain unlike anything Alina has ever felt shoots into her chest and her mouth opens in shock, her own hand clutching at the pain. *This is it-*

Just as Ivan is about to crush her into nothing, darkness falls over them in an ominous thunderclap.

"*What madness is this? Have you lost your minds*?"

Alina is almost certain that she's never heard the Darkling sound so shaken with disbelief. He uses his power to shield Alina from Ivan's view, effectively cutting off his power from working on her. Ivan may still hear her heartbeat, but he cannot crush it.

In a rush of power, the Darkling picks her up into his arms and takes her to the healers. When he looks into her eyes, he sees the emptiness there, the burned-out expression of lost hope and exhaustion.

It scares him, to see it in her face.

"Fix her wounds, any internal bleeding," he tells the confused, terrified healers. His own heart feels ill, staring at her.

Her silent, accusing stare says, *you ruined my plans.*

Aleksander's mouth twists, emotions of terror and worry for her mixing with anger at her. Anger that she can't just accept her place in life, accept her place by his side, as his Queen. "Fix her," he orders, even though he knows the healers cannot fix the emotional scars that lie deep inside of her.

These are wounds that time just doesn't seem to be healing *fast enough.*

---

---

He goes back out into the rain to find his most trusted Grisha, trying to hold back the urge to slice him into pieces.

Ivan is where he left him, crouched in the mud, head in his hands. A dejected figure. Aleksander glances at the tightly closed casket and tries to cool his fury.

"I'm sorry, *moi soverenyi.* I didn't mean to-"

"She's never gotten on with you," the Darkling says blandly into the rain. His breath is visible in the cold. "And you've never gotten on with her. She used it against you. I realize the death of Fedyor may have blinded you to the fact that her intent was to *make you kill her*."

Ivan drops his hands to his knees, collecting himself. A muscle in his jaw twitches with withheld emotion. "I've *disappointed* you." His voice cracks over the word oddly.

"Yes," Aleksander confirms flatly. "But I also understand why. Tell me this won't happen again, Ivan."

The other man straightens up, face absent of feeling. "It won't happen again, *moi soverenyi."*

Acknowledging it, Aleksander says, "I'm separating you two, for now-"

“No one else is able to handle her-”

Holding up a silencing hand, the Darkling continues, “That isn’t for you to worry about. Some time apart will do you well, I think. Time for you both to decompress…due to your loss. The loss you both have suffered.” Aleksander reaches out a hand and places it on Ivan’s shoulder. “Fedyor was a good man. His absence is certainly felt.”

Ivan’s head bows and the muscles in his neck tighten as he holds back an emotional response to those words.

---

---

Alina has new guards for a whole year after ‘the incident’, as Aleksander calls it.

They are inexperienced. She plays on that, twisting them up into knots, slipping them for entire days at a time.

“They are for your safety,” Aleksander tells her at one of the celebrations being held at the Little Palace. She fits perfectly in his arms, the way she always does, even if she is a distant star that he can never seem to truly possess. “You shouldn’t continue causing them so much trouble. No one wants duty at your doors anymore.”

“A shame,” she replies. “None of them have the balls to deal with me, do they? I thought it was considered a cushy job, guarding the Sun Summoner.”

He spins her, marveling at her striking appearance, even with the chill in her gaze. She's everything he's ever wanted, everything he's *waited for*; and somehow she keeps slipping further away. “You know that’s not true. It’s a hard job, keeping you alive.”

“I imagine it is.” She smiles up at him, even if it doesn’t entirely reach her lovely eyes. “A pity none of them compare to Ivan, hmm? Will you be foisting him upon me any time soon? I grow weary of these new guards fawning over me. I find it rather disturbing. It's always *Sankta this* and *Sankta that*.”

Aleksander exhales through his nose in a soft huff of dark amusement. “Be careful what you wish for, love. You just may receive what you ask for.”

Her eyes glitter. She won’t admit that she misses the way that Ivan *didn’t* treat her like some sort of princess.

He never treated her like a saint.

…and she’s not one. She could have been, perhaps, if Aleksander had allowed her to destroy the Fold.

Instead, she’s become a weapon that other nations fear to whisper of, because she is the harbinger of the Fold being brought to their doorsteps.

She is the herald of men, women, and children being consumed by the darkness. Of them screaming as they're torn to pieces by monsters. She is the knife that the Darkling wields and there is no greater shame in her heart.

---

When war finally comes to an end, after all these years, Alina wonders if freedom is finally in her grasp.

---

“Are you leaving me? Is that what this is?” The Darkling asks of her dryly from the shadows, watching as she glides through the front doors, her inept guards slipped once more.

Alina flinches; she had not heard him approach. She had thought him off in Shu Han still, causing his political drama there. “That’s the plan. You have no need of me. I have done my part for you all these years. You have the control of the continent. Now, *let me go*.”

For a moment, Aleksander looks angry at this demand. His eyes go dark and hard, as if prepared to chain her down again, like he did in the early days. Then, he steps forward, closer to her, slowly, idly. Contemplating. Sharp mind calculating what giving her what she wants might gain him. “It is true that I have brought peace. I have control. But it might not always stay that way. Mortals are terribly predictable, when it comes to the eb and flow of war. If I have need of you again, will you come back to me? If I let you go…”

Alina freezes. *He’ll consider it? Giving me freedom?* But, She never wants to come back. She never wants to see his face ever again, no matter how lovely. No matter how her heart beats for him, this wicked, awful man. “Must I?”

“Yes.” A thin smile shapes his fine lips as he examines her. “I think I understand what the problem has been, all these years. I realize you need space from me. After all this…strife. From the very beginning. You’ve been hurting and have no escape from it. That is… understandable. We have been together for what must seem like a long time to you-”

“Too long,” Alina mutters, eyes narrowing.

He gracefully pretends he didn’t hear her. He is handsome as the sun filters down through the clouds, nearly touching the darkness of his fine hair. A lovely man with a wicked, rotted organ for a heart. To think she truly, utterly loved him once. “I’m allowing you leave me. You may…how shall I say this? You may have your space. *For now*.”

Alina’s shoulders sag in disbelief. She’d been ready to fight for this and here he’s just letting her go? After all this horror and pain and misery? “Really?”

*What’s the catch?*

As if he’s heard her thought, Aleksander smiles knowingly. “You will take Ivan-”

Alina pales and bursts out cursing. She throws her bags on the ground, hands curling into claws. “Oh, *bloody* Saints! You’ve gone insane! Have you forgotten how we *tried to murder each other*-”

Darkness fills the open air, inky and heartless, surrounding her in its embrace. Aleksander steps forward until they are toe to toe, his eyes memorizing the lines of her face. He loves her, his wayward, unwilling Summoner. Beautiful and cold as the dawn. His songbird who wants to stretch her wings once more. “He will protect you, wherever you choose to settle. And when I call for you to return, he will bring you back to me-”

“*Why him*? Why not *anyone* else?” Being with Ivan isn’t freedom. It’s like a prison *within* a prison.

The Darkling brushes her cheek with the back of his hand fondly. “Because no one else knows how to control you. I trust him with you, Alina. He knows what you mean to me. Now, go back inside. I’ll have Genya make arrangements for your travel.”

Alina stares at him in disbelief. “This is it. You’re really going to let me leave.”

“Think of it as a momentary respite. You will be back. Never forget that, Alina.”

---

---

That night, when he takes her to his bed, he kisses her as if he still has a soul to love her with.

In fact, she can almost believe it. Every move he makes nearly convinces her that leaving is a poor choice. *Almost*.

But not quite.

“You’ll never know what you mean to me,” he says into her mouth as his hips slowly shift, her back arching.

He's slow and gentle, like a summer night, the way he always is.

Alina still won’t stay.

Not with a taste of freedom so near.

---

---

When the day finally comes, Alina dresses in normal clothes, pleased to be free of her *kefta,* which has become just another prison to her. There is no reason to travel in it now, there is no reason to call attention to herself.

She doesn't need to be known as a Grisha. All she's ever wanted is to be normal and now she's been given the chance again.

There's a plain coach waiting for her outside, a few chests and boxes of belongings attached to it. She's not bringing all that much, so she assumes the other things belong to the man leaning against the side of the coach, his arms crossed over his chest. Her heart makes a weird little hiccup of nervousness, because it's been so long since she's seen him and the last time was…well, she'd been an awful witch.

Ivan is glaring at her, eyes spitting all sorts of hateful thoughts her way. He's forgone his scarlet *kefta* as well, which is possibly adding to the irritation in his gaze. He's always been proud of being Grisha and Alina knows it must infuriate him to have to hide it.

Most of irritation must just be for her, naturally. He cuts a fierce figure, even without his Grisha attire. Black gloves cover his hands, likely to cover the Sherborn bear claw amplifier at his hand. The very reason that he hasn't aged, same as Alina.

"Ivan," she says as politely as she can, stepping up to him.

She doesn't know how to feel. She's torn between shame for how she acted the night of Fedyor's funeral and apprehension at having to be trapped with Ivan in order to gain her freedom. If only for a time.

His mouth curls slightly, very *very* slightly. A slight hint of teeth, not a smile, more so a baring of fang. "Sun Summoner." His tone is disdainful.

She places her hand in his and allows him to guide her up into the coach. His touch is warm and firm, the strong hand that she hasn't touched in a year almost as familiar to her as her own face in the mirror. "You can't call me that, anymore. The point is for me to *not* be the Sun Summoner."

He gets inside with her, glancing back at the Little Palace. He doesn't want to leave and she knows it. Ivan's probably been cursing her to the void and back in his head. "So, I've heard. You're running away from your problems, like a coward. As you always have."

Shots fired already and it's only been a few minutes.

"Oh, I've almost *missed* you," Alina breathes out, staring at him.

The coach pulls forward and she isn't sure how this future is going to shake out, not with him giving her this look, the one that says he'd rather ditch her by the side of the road somewhere.

Turning to look out the window, she glances backwards at the Little Palace and imagines the darkness bidding her farewell.

*For now.*

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** Comments and kudos are loved, even if you horrified after being beat up by all that angsty shit XD
Sorry! T.T I'm telling you, the next chapter is not so angst filled, as Alina will start finding her agency again and get out of her pity party mode.

At least know Alina is already at the bottom here, she can only go up from here in regards to coming into her own. ~~poor Alina baby~~ Things will get better...but they probably gotta get worse first. Oh, the joys of darkfics :D

# Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> **AN:** Surprise gigantic chapter! One good thing to note is that this one won't be quite so utterly hopeless and dreary like the first chapter. Alina is finally going to start finding herself again while her wings get space to stretch.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They stop and switch coaches during their travels, Alina sending their guards home to Aleksander.

Ivan is leaning back in the coach, eyes rolling. “He’ll find out wherever we go, one way or another. You can’t hide.”

Alina sniffs as the new coach and driver takes off. “No one said I need to make it easy for him.”

“You don’t make *anything* easy for *anyone*,” Ivan replies without amusement.

She kicks at his feet, but he grabs her boot and yanks on her a bit for it. The air is tense between them, and neither is willing to acknowledge or mention the ‘incident’ from the year prior. Although, every so often, Alina is certain she sees him giving her a glance that seems to say *are you still a suicidal wretch, I wonder?*

The majority of their travel is mainly full of awkward silence, with Ivan brooding out the window more often than not, trying to pretend she doesn’t exist.

She *also* tries to pretend he doesn’t exist, but that’s pretty hard when he takes up half of the coach. It’s near impossible when the horses pause for the night and she’s curled up on her seat and he’s sprawled out just spare inches from her.

It gives her some measure of sick pleasure to know that he can’t ever avoid the fact that she’s there, because he’s always listening to her heart; he can always pick her out wherever she is, even if he *doesn’t want to*. It’s a result of being her guard for so many years. In the same way, she knows the sound of his footsteps, his *footsteps*. If she were alone in a room, she would know the sound of his walk, the cadence of his boots on stone. The sound of his voice in a crowded room.

It’s unacceptably intimate, in some ways, being a captor and captive. Even if this time around, she’s *free*. She has no intention of playing captive any longer.

They end up in an outskirt city of Os Kervo in Western Ravka. It isn’t hard to find accommodations, with different apartments available above shops in the middle of the

downtown market. Alina makes her choice, only idly glad that Aleksander sent her with some funds.

He said something to the note of, "*I won't have you living in squalor, Alina. Even if I can't be with you, I'll make sure you're taken care of.*"

Another form of control, but at least a relatively welcome one. *Somewhat*.

The apartment Alina chooses is on the floor above a flower shop. She preferred it to the larger apartment up the street, due to the fact that the other one was above a pub and she was not going to live above the craziness of a pub.

She sleeps so little as it is.

The place she's chosen is quaint. Needs a little work. It's not much, but it's a place away from Aleksander's watchful gaze. His cunning. His overbearing control of her.

It's a place of her own. Well, mostly her own-

"Are you pleased?" Ivan asks with a slight sneer pulling at his mouth. His eyes are on the windows that require some cleaning, the front door that seems to be warped and in need of fixing. He's used to luxury, whereas Alina honestly doesn't care, having been an orphan and a First Army grunt once upon a time. "Does this illusion of freedom give you joy?"

"Something must, because you certainly don't," Alina replies dryly.

Their coachman helps them unload the coach, leaving them to carrying their belongings up into the apartment. There's two bedrooms, so Alina claims the one that Ivan doesn't.

The unpacking goes quick enough for her; she didn't bring all that much, wanting to start her new life with as few reminders as possible of, well, *everything*. Ivan has more, unwilling to part with his past.

When she passes his room by, she sees a chest full of things that she knows are Fedyor's. Some piece of her heart falters slightly as understanding comes to her. Of course, he wouldn't leave anything of Fedyor's just as she didn't leave anything of Mal's. She brought what little she has left of him with her, to cherish in her quiet moments alone.

Regardless, this act seems too sentimental for Alina to attribute to Ivan, who, to all appearances, doesn't feel a fucking thing with his useless rotten heart.

When she catches him pulling out a scarlet kefta from the large chest, bringing it briefly to his face, Alina steps away quickly, not wanting to see that display of raw feeling. She mentally rebukes herself for not being more understanding. If her heart still hurts when she thinks of Mal, when she traces her fingers over his old sketchbooks, how can she not imagine that Ivan is in a state far worse?

He lost Fedyor only *a year ago*, she realizes with a heavy heart, and Alina didn't even have Mal in her life as long as Ivan had Fedyor.

Even if he seems like the sturdy, emotionless rock he's always been, Alina knows his insides must be an open wound.

When Mal was executed, all those years back, she'd wanted to dig her hand into her own chest and throw her beating heart against a wall. Hell, she'd wanted to be buried with him, alive and breathing.

…and she'd felt like that for *years.*

*Great,* she thinks morosely as she stands in the kitchen, eyeballing the countertops, not really seeing them. *I'm living with someone as emotionally unhinged as I am. This can't end well.*

---

The first night, her dreams plague her relentlessly.

She tosses and turns, a scream track playing in her mind of everyone she's ever failed. Of all the souls that she couldn't save. Of the cities that she watched get consumed by the Fold, of the *volcra* and their claws, ripping and tearing flesh from bone. The aroma of copper and rot on the wind.

In shades of black and white, she watches Mal's mouth moving, saying his final words to her, all before the Cut takes his head in a spray of blood, spilling across the soil.

A familiar dream, only this time, Mal says, *it's your fault. It's all your fault-*

With a gasp, she wakes, clutching at her chest, feeling tears already on her face. Her ribcage feels too small as sobs heave inside of it.

She knows that Aleksander kept many of the nightmares at bay, while she remained at his side in the Little Palace. He overtook her dreams and made them calm in his effort to protect her mind from the constant barrage of guilt and loss that her mind conjured. However...that was always done as a reward, never a permanent solution...and Alina often misbehaved.

But now…now that she's temporarily left him, it seems he no longer has any desire to ease her nights whatsoever. *At all*. He probably thinks it will make her more eager to return to his side, some sort of long game he must be playing. Aleksander is always playing the *long game*.

With her heart galloping a thousand miles per hour, her stomach ill, throat full of tears, Alina does not sleep again that night.

In the morning, her eyes feel swollen and puffy. Unsurprisingly, Ivan looks much the same, though Alina isn't going to ask if she is the one who kept him up all night. He gives her a dirty look over their kitchen table, silently sipping the coffee she made. That seems answer enough.

The second night doesn't go any better than the first, nor does the third night. When Ivan drags her out with him to get provisions from the shop across the street, Alina makes sure to grab herself a few bottles of liquor.

He gives her an odd look about it, but she's not about to tell him she can't sleep for shit, because he probably already knows. She isn't going to ask for help; she's just going to drink and hope it makes her mind and soul go numb.

---

It doesn't work. The drinking thing.

At first, it seems like it does, when she sneaks a bottle into her room, closing the door behind her for the night. It feels warm inside her body, leaving her fuzzy, if not also dehydrated. It lulls her into slumber easily enough, but it doesn't keep her there.

The nightmares comes back, as if in slow motion, spinning her around relentlessly until she wakes up feeling ill and depressed, heart unsteady.

*I'm going to get through this phase*, Alina tells herself as she lies on her balcony, the rain pouring down on her upturned face. *I'm going to be strong. I'm going to live my own life. I can do this.*

The rain is like ice on her skin, but she barely feels it. Time passes slowly and the numb from the cold is making her tired. She fades-

The door to the balcony slides open and Ivan's face is scowling down at her. "Are you trying to kill yourself again? It's freezing."

"I h-haven't d-decided yet-t," Alina stutters out, realizing her teeth are actually chattering. "Probably-y no-t."

With a grunt of exasperation, Ivan picks her up off the ground as if she's light as a feather and carries her soaking form inside. He tosses a few blankets at her and tells her to change and bundle up. "Go to sleep," he commands. "In your bed this time, like a sane human being."

---

Ivan makes no secret of his distaste for where they're living. In fact, it's near daily routine to hear him complaining about something, even as Alina spends her time working on various projects that their landlord had mentioned would likely need to be done upon moving in.

"This place is little better than an encampment tent for *otkazat'sya* on the front."

Alina scowls at him from where she's cleaning the floors, her hair swept up into a blue scarf, embroidered in elegant gold. An old gift from Genya. "Maybe if you helped me fix it up, it wouldn't be so distasteful to you."

“Is that part of my job description?”

She growls and throws a wet rag at him. It falls short and he snorts at her pathetic effort. She already wants to kill him and it’s only been a few days. The lack of sleep might be contributing to her short fuse. She’d say it’s contributing to his as well, but he’s always been an unrelenting ass, so there’s that to consider. “What use are you to me, Ivan?”

“I’m not your maid or your handyman. I keep you alive and that’s *all*, girl.”

She opens her mouth to tell him not to call her a girl, she’s a damn woman, but then she decides it’s not worth the effort. He’s not worth the dramatics.

Alina also realizes that he’s likely never had to actually take care of a household before. Her mouth drops open in dismay as this thought occurs to her. Even as an orphan she had chores, but he’d been at the Grisha Palace since childhood, being waited on hand and feet.

A slice of envy and irritation coils inside of her.

She walks over to him and kicks at his boots.

“What?” He snaps at her with irritation, dark eyes flashing.

“Get up. I’m going to teach you something, for once.”

“There’s nothing *you* can teach me.”

“We have a door to fix and *you’re doing it*.” To prove her point she tosses her second wet rag down at his chest. It lands with a wet slap, right on target.

He turns red, teeth grinding together.

Twenty minutes later, he’s helping her with the hinges on the front door, fixing the broken one and oiling the others. “Can’t we just pay someone to do this?”

Alina grins up at him, noting the grease on his fingers, the smudge of it on his cheekbone. “It builds character, Ivan. Besides, isn’t this better than brooding? *I* think so.”

She likes doing things, to keep her mind off darker thoughts. To keep from wallowing in self-pity, because she hates falling into that habit. Without something to occupy her, all she has is memories and those are mainly ugly things.

Ivan enjoys wallowing in his misery, wears it like armor, so they may be opposites in this.

---

---

It doesn’t take long for her to realize that either he needs to go or she does.

The air is suffocating in their upstairs apartment. Ivan paces, *a lot*. She can hear his footsteps throughout the day, echoing off the wood. He's restless and she needs to spend less time feeling sorry for herself.

It's what she does, lying on the balcony attached to her bedroom. Lying on her back, staring up at the stars, *feeling sorry for herself*.

Which is pathetic, really. She's been feeling sorry for herself for decades now and it's time she finds a way *to stop*. She needs *to do something* with this freedom she's earned, even if her heart still feels dark and empty.

Alina finally makes the decision to start exploring again, like she did as a young girl.

"I'm going," she tells Ivan blandly, thinking she'll go walk around town, get some fresh air. See the sights, get a feel for the people she now lives amongst. Enjoy the fact that no one is going to recognize her and no one is going to think she's special.

She gets to be no one again and that's all she damn well wants. It's what she's wanted forever, it's what she wanted for her life with Mal.

Her heart seizes sickly at the thought of him, an old scabbed wound on her heart with his name on it.

Ivan looks at her attire and stands, approaching her saying, "Where are we going?"

She holds up a hand, lightly pressing on his firm chest. Pushing him away, even as his gaze dips to where she touching him, as if he's offended.

He probably is. He probably thinks she's cursed and that it might rub off on him. Hell, he might even be right. He's right about a lot of things, which is *odious*.

Fedyor always told her that, as she recalls.

"I don't think you heard me right." Alina says slowly, enunciating every word. "*I'm* going, you are *staying*."

His dark eyes narrow at her. "I don't think so. Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Oh, you want to know what I think now? *Fine*. I think you take your job too seriously. You cannot expect us both to stay cooped up in here. *Forever*."

His mouth is making an unpleasant expression shift his face. "We aren't going to be here forever, remember? This is temporary-"

Oh, he would enjoy reminding her of that, wouldn't he? He'd love to go back to the Little Palace, stat. "Well, we aren't going any time soon, so it's time you get with the program, Ivan. I'm going out to look around. I want to be alone, without *you.* And I think you want to be alone, without *me*. Seems fair, doesn't it?"

"But-"

“I will come back. I promise.” It’s simple. Why can’t he understand that he doesn’t need to have such a tight leash on her? How the hell did he survive that whole year not guarding her after their ‘incident’? It’s a compulsive thing with him and she needs to break them of this. “All of Mal’s sketchbooks are in my room, yeah? You know I’d never leave those.”

There’s a blossom of acceptance growing in his gaze. He looks like he’d rather not entertain a single word she says, like it’s killing him to do so, but finally he says, “Two hours, max. Be back or I *will* come find you.”

Well, okay.

~*~

When she steps out the front door alone for the first time since they’ve arrived, Alina feels claustrophobic. She’s not used to being outside alone like this. Not outside of the Little Palace, anyway. For a moment, Alina is frozen with a certain terror, feeling like she’s about to get herself in trouble, *punished*.

But then, she remembers that this is what freedom feels like. Open air and so many different choices to make. Taking a deep breath, she walks down the bright, sunny street, smiling at all the normal people going about their daily lives. The different vendors, selling their wares, children running around playing games, men and women walking in and out of the pub, laughing.

The sights, the smells. There’s fresh bread on the wind and Alina inhales deeply. A few passerby’s bid her good morning and she smiles brightly back at them. This is what normality feels like.

As soon as that thought hits her, Alina ducks into an empty alley and has a good cry about it, covering her eyes with her hand, gritting her teeth to keep from making any noise as her chest shudders with sobs. The normalcy of it all makes her think of Mal and how she would have loved to live in a town like this with him. Free of pain, free of war, free of the Grisha.

*You would have loved it here, Mal. There’s so much life to live here,* she thinks sorrowfully.

When she finally collects herself, eyes dry, she walks back out into the main road to continue her exploration. She wonders if she can find a job of sorts, eventually. She’d love to work again. To do something worthwhile with her time.

*Another mission for another day*, she tells herself.

True to her word, she starts on her way back home before the second hour is up. She gets to the front door of their apartment and unlocks it, slipping her shoes off just inside. Just before she goes up the stairs to their main living floor, Alina notices Ivan’s boots beside hers.

There’s fresh dirt on them and her eyes narrow. Gritting her teeth, she walks up the stairs and confronts him where he’s idly cutting an apple, eating the slices straight from the knife like some sort of coldblooded mercenary.

Alina places her hands on her hips. “You couldn’t restrain yourself, could you?” Her voice is accusing.

Ivan cracks his neck idly in a way that makes her flinch. His voice is smug. “Did you really think I was going to let you wander around a strange environment by yourself? Besides, you didn’t even notice me.”

Angry, feeling like her privacy and her agency is still being invaded, Alina hisses, “I don’t need protecting anymore. I don’t need to be watched. *I’m exactly where I want to be*. You need to get over this…” she waves her hand vaguely in frustration, unable to find the right words. “…this urge of yours. I’m not helpless.”

He makes a noise of nasty amusement. “Except, you *are*.”

She stomps her feet on the wood floor, like a petulant child. “*Ugh!* You make me want to pull my own hair!”

It isn’t until later that she realizes he probably observed her having her moment of weakness, of her crying in an alley, and it makes her even more humiliated.

*I hate that man.*

---

Sleep is still evading her.

There are nights when she’s certain that she’d rather not fall asleep at all, if only to avoid the horror in her mind.

The guilt she feels, the shame, it’s all like quicksand, sucking her under no matter how hard she fights. No amount of alcohol helps and she finds herself drinking more and more to try and numb the pain in her chest.

When this destructive pattern reaches its peak one evening, she finds herself vomiting violently for a good five hours. Alina tells herself that alcohol is clearly not the answer, even if she’s not thinking of anything but the pain in her belly now.

*Never again, I swear*, she thinks as she presses her face to the cool tiles on the bathroom floor, sweating and panting.

---

She explores more, as days pass. She tries to pretend that Ivan is absent, that he isn’t likely somewhere close by, keeping a detached eye on her. Alina is trying to convince herself that he’ll eventually grow comfortable with her being out and about alone. Small steps…

To be fair, he’s getting better about it, actually. She’s come home a few times and realized that he never left. Perhaps Ivan is using the alone time to finally mourn Fedyor properly, instead of worrying about her all the damn time. In fact, she’d prefer he spend some time with himself, because he clearly needs to deal with some of the raw pain that he just carries about like a bloody plague.

He drinks *kvas* heavily some nights, but even Alina can confirm that alcohol doesn't help one bit.

Roaming isn't the sort of therapy she hoped it would be. By the end of the first month, Alina realizes her mind is still heavy. Always, her thoughts are dragged back to what awaits her in the Little Palace. Every time she catches Ivan's eye in their shared apartment, she's reminded of the fact that he'd love nothing more than to drag her back, *immediately*.

He's not well adjusted to the situation they're in. He's restless, like a tiger from Shu Han, and she does not enjoy being caged with him.

Instead of feeling free, she realizes that she's *running from him*, ceaselessly. Oh, not in the truest sense, because he's *not chasing* her, but the fact that she doesn't want to stay home is avoidance. She takes in the city endlessly, memorizing it, trying to find new ways to keep her mind occupied.

Stress is a heavy weight to bear, otherwise. She can't imagine being trapped with him for an entire day, dealing with her own mental health while literally feeling the way he broods angrily. He's quiet, more often than not, but the displeasure in the lines of his body is clear.

His dark, hazel-spun eyes blame her relentlessly and she's bloody tired of it.

Alina wants to shake him like a naughty child and demand that he stop blaming her, because she isn't the one who wanted him here; Aleksander is. If Ivan should be blaming anyone, he should be blaming the Darkling.

*He won't of course*, Alina thinks bitterly, *he'd die for that man.*

There was a time she might have done the same. It sickens her heart, like a poison, slowly turning the organ dark and diseased.

It's a strange thing, to not be with Aleksander anymore. To not be doted on any longer. She doesn't miss it per say and she absolutely doesn't miss *him*. No, she's had enough of him for a lifetime and she's glad that he's finally realized it.

She's begrudgingly grateful that Aleks allowed her this time to get her space, to find her normal self again. Perhaps he finally understood the madness uncoiling in her gaze, day by day. He understood that in order to salvage her, he needed to give her time to heal.

*If healing is even possible, after all these years,* she muses.

Aleksander always claimed time would heal all wounds, but he never specified if he meant, like, twenty years or two hundred. There is *clearly a difference*.

As she's walking through the crowded streets, Alina halts as her eyes catch on the mapmaker's shop, just at the end of the road. There's a sign on the outside, something new, that says 'help wanted'. For a moment, she blinks, frozen in time. Then, an idea bursts into life inside her chest.

Without looking back, she goes forth and enters the shop.

It's well lit, full of finely framed commissions on the walls, ink splattered on tables, glass display cases showing old antiques, some of them from Alina's childhood. At the sound of the door opening and closing, a lean sort of man looks up from where he's currently bent over a map. "Can I help you?"

Alina searches for her words and points a finger at the door, a slight smile on her lips. "Ah, actually I was looking to help you. It says you're looking for help, just outside."

The man quirks his thin lips and looks her over. He thinks she's too young. "I'm not looking for another apprentice at the moment, lass."

Puffing out her chest, Alina says, "I'm not an apprentice. I can draw most maps of the past few decades out with more detail than you can imagine. I can't travel to new places for you for mapwork, but I can certainly help with commissions here in the shop." For a moment, she realizes that perhaps she sounded too forceful. She softens her tone, almost going nervous. "*Ah*. If that's what you're looking for, anyway."

She really wants this opportunity. It will get her mind off *everything*. It will keep her out of the apartment, away from feeling the burn of Ivan's antagonism.

The shop owner, who must be Timur of *Timur's Maps*, looks skeptical. "What are your credentials?"

She straightens and salutes sharply. "I was a First Army cartographer." She was, and at least the First Army still exists so that she doesn't have to make up some very strange tale about when she was in the military.

With a grunt, the man unravels a large, blank parchment. "Show me what you can do, lass."

Without hesitation, Alina steps forward and begins, her mind already dancing over landscapes and landmarks. With finesse, her fingers remembering their skill, she begins sketching out when the Fold resided between Ravka. It's something many of the younger generations would have never seen before, because the Fold is currently hovering at the border of Fjerda now, just a wall of protection.

"That's amazing," Timur utters as he watches her build out the map framework. "You have these details memorized?"

Alina nods. "I do. For a few different time periods. I can even do when the Fold was at Shu Han, with detail to where the north and south ends of the Fold existed along the great mountain walls."

The master mapmaker watches her for a few moments, making a few impressed noises here and there. Finally, he lifts his artists hands up, stained with ink, and gestures at the table. "You have a job here. We often have commissions come in for older maps to be made. Rich collectors and the like. You understand. You would be perfect for servicing those."

…and so, she returns home with a bright grin on her face, so bright that she can't contain it. Ivan notices as she begins making them dinner. "What are you smiling like a fool for?"

She isn't going to let his mood sour anything for her. Her excitement is palpable. "I got a job. *I* got a *job*."

"…and this pleases you?" He seems confused as to why she'd want to do something as mundane as working a normal job. Of course, he's the consummate Grisha; he thinks normalcy is boring.

She makes a goofy face at him. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

Ivan scoffs and rolls his eyes.

---

---

A few nights later, she has the worst nightmare yet.

*She feels like she's being chased, the minute she falls into sleep, as if she's going to be dragged back to the Little Palace, kicking and screaming. She running through the streets of her new town, being chased by a pack of volcra, hearing the gnashing of their teeth, the beat of their wings.*

*They've come to take her back. To plunge her into the darkness again. They are coming to consume this lovely town and all its lovely, kind people.*

*Her feet catch on something and she finds that she's tripped over Mal's headless body. His head is some feet away, murmuring with accusation, it's all your fault, it's all your fault…*

*A river of blood is coursing down through the street and Alina can't get to her feet fast enough, she can't stand, her foot is caught on something, caught by Mal's dead hands as he holds her in place. The wall of blood falls over her, thick and hot.*

*It's blood that's filling her lungs, until she's swimming in it.*

With a strangled noise of despair, Alina comes awake to the sensation that something is grasping her ankle still. She can't breathe, she's nearly lost to hyperventilation, to a complete spiral of a panic attack. With a strangled yelp, she kicks out, thrashing madly, half envisioning herself in the grasp of Mal's dead corpse when she hears a hiss of pain.

"It's just me, you thrashing weasel. *Stop*." She knows that voice, that tone. It doesn't calm the feelings inside of her in the slightest. She panics further, trying to roll into her heavy sheets. *Why is he in my room, he needs to go, I don't want him to see me like this,* races incoherently through Alina's frazzled mind.

Ivan is most definitely in her room, on her bed, crawling across it to get closer to her, fighting her pillows as he tries to get ahold of her again. "Stop this nonsense. You're keeping *me* up at night. *All the time*."

"Leave me *alone*," her voice cracks embarrassingly, and she's moving under her pillows in mortification. She's not even in a mindset to care that she's only wearing a thin nightgown.

“Go *away*.”

With his whole body nearly over her now, Ivan manages to restrain the kicking of her feet and swaddles her up into his arms tightly, muttering caustically, “Calm down, I’m not here to harm you. This craziness of yours needs to stop so I can sleep *for once*.”

Alina makes as if to claw at him, still in her fight or flight mode, absolutely panicked from her dream, her breathing tight and difficult- but then something most interesting happens. Something she doesn’t expect.

An absolute drop rush hits her, the frantic beating of her heart silencing into an easy thrum. She feels drunk. Absolutely drunk and sleepy, as if floating in a lake with a bottle of wine already emptied into her belly. No fears, no worries, nothing but floating. Floating, sinking even, to the very bottom of the true sea, into the blackest of pits where there is nothing but complete absolution and silence. It’s almost overpowering.

He’s *overpowering*.

It’s Ivan’s heartrending.

“That’s not how Fedyor made me feel…” she finds herself saying for no good reason whatsoever. She sounds one hundred fifty percent dazed- or *high*. Is something wrong? Is he doing it wrong? Oh, she *misses* Fedyor. He was like being cozy on a picnic blanket with the sun overhead on a warm spring day. Gentle and easy, *safe*.

Ivan feels like the roaring ocean, all-consuming and all-powerful.

He’s maneuvered them so that he’s sitting with his back to her headboard. “You’re fine,” he says quietly in his low voice. “I’m just more powerful than he was.”

*Oh, yes, that makes perfect sense*, Alina finds herself thinking, like some sort of tipsy airhead. *I think I like this. Why have you never done this for me before, Ivan, you absolute ass.*

It isn’t until she’s practically sprawled in his lap like an indecent cat that she realizes he might feel awkward about the whole thing. Not that she cares. This is nearly the best she’s felt in so long.

“I should go,” he’s saying hoarsely as she snuggles up against him, closer, trying to remain tied to the feeling of sinking into silence at the bottom of the sea.

Her nightgown is riding up precariously at her waist, so he fixes it, averting his face. How gentlemanly of him.

She latches onto him without a single intent of letting him go, because for the first time since they met all those years ago, she doesn’t want him to leave her. He’s so solid and warm, all muscle under his clothes. The screaming in her mind is silent and her heart feels calm.

If Alina means to say anything meaningful, it doesn’t come out the right way. “*Mhmm*,” is all she manages as she fades into the darkness of the sea in her mind, crashing deep into depths

without a single thought about air.

---

---

The next morning, Alina wakes up to the sun on her face, alone and sprawled in her sheets. She feels glorious. With a sigh, she stretches and arches her back, pressing her heels into the mattress. She rolls over and notices the way her pillow doesn't quite smell like her pillow anymore. *Ivan,* she thinks, *that's right.*

Feeling rather spry and energetic, she pulls herself out of bed and gets dressed, trying to not acknowledge the fact that her nightgown is like, kinda translucent. It's not like she expected him to barge into her bedroom in the middle of the night after all.

Oh, well, they're adults, they can cope.

When she enters the kitchen, inhaling the scent of coffee that Ivan appears to have actually brewed himself, she notices him looking at her oddly.

Alina goes straight to pouring herself a cup, wanting to taste it on her tongue. She's about to make a comment about him learning yet another thing from her -how to brew coffee- but then she notices the way he's still looking at her. She does a double take, making a face of confusion. "What's wrong?"

He looks away. "Nothing."

*Okaaaay.*

They sit in their typical silence, at least for a short while.

"Saints," Alina groans as she sips from her cup, inhaling the scent of it, even if it's not as good as what was always served at the Little Palace. "I slept so good last night."

Ivan's neck seems to heat with a slight flush and Alina for the life of her cannot seem to understand why.

She doesn't want to admit that she's going to need a lot of alcohol to even come close to the level of peace she met last night because of him. And, why would she want to go back to that garbage when she can have him?

Not that she's entitled to Ivan or anything, but *seriously*.

It's not like he hasn't noticed her collection of empty wine bottles. He could have prevented all of that destructive behavior with a few touches of his fingers. Besides, he's the one who loves being a Grisha. He *loves* his power.

"Thanks. For last night," she says softly, looking into the darkness of her coffee cup. "I really needed that."

He's still not looking at her. "You're welcome."

---

---

She's been meaning to look at Fedyor's things. Alina knows she shouldn't do it, but she does.

Ivan's out somewhere, perhaps running, because keeping a soldiers schedule keeps him more calm, now that's he's relaxed his need to guard Alina every waking moment of every day. Thank the Saints he's *gotten over that urge after all these months*.

His bedroom isn't locked, just as she never locks hers. She walks in, noting that his scent is much stronger where he sleeps. It's masculine, a mix of his natural scent and his wintery cologne. His room is also much cleaner than hers, kept in neat order.

She sees Fedyor's *kefta* in the closet and she can't help but walk over to it, wondering if it still smells of him. In her mind, she can see his smiling face and his twinkling eyes, the sound of his laughter and his sly jokes.

*You were such a flirt, Fedyor. And so damn lovely*, she finds herself thinking with a fond smile.

Touching the fabric carefully, Alina leans forward and inhales, disappointed that it's far too faint to tell if any part of Fedyor remains on it. Her heart sadly flips over; she doesn't remember that much about Mal in that respect. She has none of his clothes and even if she did, his scent would have faded ages ago, lost to time.

Stepping away from the *kefta*, she goes to the shelf of books on the other side of the room, by the neatly made bed. Ivan isn't much of a reader and she recognizes most of the volumes as Fedyor's favorites. He had let her borrow so many of these, during the early years when Aleksander kept her under lock and key.

Fedyor had never liked or supported how Aleksander had used her.

A memory comes to her faintly, of Fedyor visiting her in her tightly guarded room in the Little Palace. In the early days. The lights low and dark, ominous as her mood. As dark and empty as her soul had felt.

*"I'm sorry for my part in all this," he told her, eyes dark. "You deserved better."*

*"You have nothing to be sorry for. You would have never been able to stand against him." Alina handed him his latest book back, her face drawn and pale. Her tone took on a bitter hew. "Though, I can't say the same for your lover."*

*A flicker of hurt crossed Fedyor's handsome features. "Ivan's set in his ways. Loyal to a fault. His greatest virtue is also his failing, I'm afraid."*

*"You know what I think?" Alina asked quietly. "I think Aleks keeps him close because he knows that Ivan is strong enough to kill him."*

*“We’ll never know the answer to that,” Fedyor muttered, pressing his lips to her forehead softly. “I’ll bring you another book tomorrow morning, alright?”*

Alina’s eyes burn for a moment with unshed tears, remembering him and his freely given kindness when her world was very dark indeed. She picks up one of his books and holds it to herself, imagining his hands on it, touching where she’s holding it now-

“What are you doing in here?” Ivan’s voice is cold as winter itself, like a lash cracking in open air. “Put that down and get out. *Now*.”

Flinching, she turns and catches his furious expression. “I thought you were gone.”

“Is that what you thought? I’m never *that* far, Alina. I thought something was wrong, but instead I find you in *my things*.”

Her heartrate must have changed drastically when she started walking through her memories, she realizes, face heating. “You need to stop invading my privacy, Ivan. I don’t need you listening to my-”

His face hardens further as he steps closer to her, completely cornering her, anger written in the lines of his frame. As always, he cuts an intimidating figure and she shivers under his fierce gaze. “You don’t respect my privacy, why should I respect yours? Give that to me *now*.”

She clutches the book to her chest all the tighter, as if afraid he’s about to yank it away from her. Alina presses herself deeper into the corner, practically up the wall, feeling trapped. “I loved him too, in case you’ve conveniently forgotten. *I miss him*,” she rasps hoarsely, running a single finger across the cover of the book cradled lovingly in her arms. “He was everything *you* are *not*.”

His jaw locks slightly at that, but he has no rebuttal.

He’s kept all of Fedyor’s things. It’s how Alina knows the love he held for the other man was real. She knows, because her lonely heart wishes she had more left of Mal to look upon in her most dark of moments, aside from only his watch and scouting sketchpads.

She does not ask Ivan if he feels the keen sting of Fedyor’s loss still. She *knows* he does. She knows that they will both carry these emotional wounds for a very, very long time.

Exhaling harshly, Ivan looks away from her, closing his eye momentarily. “Don’t damage it. Make sure you return it.”

“Of course,” she barely whispers.

“Now, get out.”

“I would love to, but you’re blocking my exit,” Alina says gently from the corner she smashed up in, looking upwards at him.

It's as if he realizes how close he is to her, how there is literally no way around him without her brushing up against him like a cat. With a scoff, he steps backwards, letting her out of where he blocked her in, where she put herself defensively.

"It's not like I was going to harm you," he mutters under his breath, almost sounding offended.

"Yeah, well, *I* didn't know that," Alina says as she scoots past him with her newfound treasure from Fedyor's collection.

---

---

Later that night, while curled up in a large chair, reading Fedyor's book, Alina poses a question to Ivan, who is across the room, sipping *kvas*. "Do you suppose we will become like him, someday?"

"Who?" His tone is flat, evened out by the strongly fermented liquor. He's drank enough that she imagines she would smell it on his breath, if they were close enough to each other.

"Aleksander. Do you suppose we will eventually heave out anything from inside of us that makes us remotely human, the way he has?"

Ivan's dark eyes meet hers over the bottle in front of him, his sharp, stone cut features stern. "You say this as if we aren't already empty inside." He lifts the bottle to his mouth and takes a deep pull from it. Alina can only imagine the burn sliding down his esophagus, but he doesn't flinch.

Alina pauses, her eyes on a book of romantic myths that had been Fedyor's favorite. Ridiculously, she feels like crying because perhaps he's right; maybe they are dead inside, but their bodies just keep operating. Unfurling herself from the chair, she approaches him carefully, even when his eyes warn her off.

She holds out a hand. "Can I have some of that?"

After a reluctant pause, Ivan puts the bottle of *kvas* in her hand. Eyes on him, Alina raises the bottle to her lips and sips, forcing herself to not cough as the rough flavor hits her tongue. She prefers wine, but she'll work with what she has. She doesn't dwell on how she can taste him where her mouth is.

His eyes are lazy with the alcohol as he watches her throat work.

She thinks about that look, a little bit.

---

---

Her days at the cartography shop change with the sudden arrival of a new apprentice. He's a sweet-looking young man that makes eyes at her *exactly* when she's looking.

It's amusing; it's *fun*. It's a simple, harmless sort of joy. Some early twenty-something is flirting with her over maps. His attempts are clumsy and *oh so* obvious. It's so easy to see it, especially when Alina is used to Aleksander's smooth subtilities.

She tries not to think of Aleksander, most days, but sometimes it's unavoidable. There is always word on the street about Os Alta. Whispers in the dark corners about what the Grisha lord will be getting up to next.

Pushing these darker thoughts away, Alina smiles into her work and forces herself to take her mind off things that she'd rather not dwell on.

A few weeks pass with her bringing along Viktor, the new apprentice. He's sweet and rather simple. He's possibly the least complex person in her life right now. How nice it would be, she thinks, to just be with someone that has no ulterior motives or wishes for her. She spends some time considering it and the more she does, the more Viktor smiles her way, as if he *knows* that she's deeply considering some no-strings play.

Which is totally out the realm of norm for her. When has she ever had a no-strings attached engagement? *Never.* It's not her style. Probably never will be.

So, it remains an innocent flirtation, something that never progresses, but she enjoys it none the less. It brightens her heart, if only slightly. One big piece of joy in her life.

Alina spends long hours there, later into the evening than usual. Not so late that it's indecent, but late enough that even Ivan starts noticing- and once he notices something, he doesn't let up.

When she comes home one night, Ivan catches her in the kitchen. He grabs her hand and examines her fingertips, noting the stain of ink. When she tries to pull away from him, he tightens his grip, eyes on her face. "You've been spending a lot of time in that shop."

She quirks an annoyed eyebrow at him. What is he getting at? "I work there, Ivan."

He snorts derisively. "Is that all you do, I wonder?"

Guilty as charged, her heartrate begins to speed up and that arrogant expression that she cannot abide passes over his features. It's always bothered her that he can look simultaneously attractive and cruel, all at once.

She's always had a thing for cruel men, unfortunately. Her track record is very poor.

"There's a boy, isn't there?" He says mockingly. "There's *always* a boy with you."

Hackles raised, Alina makes a noise of aggravation. "That's completely untrue. There was only ever *one*-"

He's not having it, gone full blown into his lecturing mode, all holier than thou. "You are so *utterly* predictable. Aren't they getting a little young for you, yet?"

Alina's face heats in a rush. Indignant. "You did not just say that to me!"

He sneers, looking pleasingly vicious while doing it. "Your hearing was fine, last I checked."

If she could just break a vase over his head right about now, she would. Even a bottle of *kvas* would do the job. She checks; there's nothing in reach. A little laugh that sounds more like a harsh bark slips from her throat. She peers up at him and says, "So, do you intend to keep me chaste, for as long as we are here?" The question comes out with scathing force. Because *really*. Does Ivan really think that's part of his job? Is it any of his business what she gets up to?

"You belong to the Darkling," he says coldly.

That is like a slap to the face, the words akin to a blow. It takes Alina a moment to react, so stunned by hearing those words, after all these months.

Then, she looks around the room with her arms out wide. She gives him a hateful, mocking glance. "I don't see him here."

He sneers, teeth sharp. He grabs her by the chin to keep her from squirming away, keeping their gazes locked, asserting his dominance. "*I'm* here."

As if that answers everything.

~*~

She defies him, naturally. That's what Alina does best.

Ivan may control quite a bit in her life, but he's not going to control where she spends her time and how. *Or with who*.

She stays late at work again and again, enjoying her harmless flirtations, until one day it comes to an abrupt end.

One evening, the shop door opens with a ring of the bell, just as she's helping Viktor clean up. Viktor looks up from where he's toweling off the tabletops, face questioning as he takes in the newcomer with hesitation. "Can I help you? We're closed…"

Alina feels her mouth go dry.

Ivan is standing in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest, face blank of any decipherable emotion. He rudely ignores Viktor's existence and focuses on Alina. "Let's go," he says in that commanding tone that books no room for argument. "There's been a string of muggings on the North side and I don't want you walking home in the dark, Alina."

Viktor is looking between the two of them now -coming to his own conclusions- and Alina has to grit her teeth to keep from exhaling like a damn dragon. *Ivan, you absolute ass.*

Giving Viktor a watery smile, Alina rolls up the final parchments and bids him goodnight. There's no sense in getting into it with Ivan here. That would get ugly and she's not about to make Viktor concerned for her wellbeing at home. She wouldn't be able to bear him giving her pitying, worried looks during the day.

Stepping up to Ivan as she pulls her coat on, she feels herself nearly start with surprise as he spreads his large hand just below the base of her neck, guiding her forward to the door. It's a blatantly possessive, protective act, and Alina can almost sense the glance Ivan must be giving to Viktor over his shoulder before he takes her out into the night.

"You are such a caveman," she tells him sourly after a few moments of walking home. The city lights are dim, the moonlight high overhead. "What is he going to think now?"

He hasn't moved his hand and Alina is painfully aware of that fact.

"If he's smart, he'll think you're unavailable." He tightens his grip only slightly, as if to prove his point.

"But, I'm *not* unavailable!" Alina twists away from him, bundling her coat around herself fully as she scowls at Ivan. "I can do whatever I want!"

They've reached the door of their apartment, the street darker here. The cast of a golden lantern hanging above them gives off a soft, warm glow.

"You'll get over that mindset." Ivan voice is caustic as he pushes her up against their front door, pinning her there as he says, "Or I'll *make* you the most unavailable woman in all of West Ravka."

Silence. Pure, dead silence, as if he's even surprised himself, as if he didn't mean to say it. Alina blinks up at him. Then-

"*Saints*, Ivan!" Alina finds herself chuckling, shaking in his domineering grasp. Her head falls back with a thud against the wood of the door as she laughs. "I can only be *so* aroused."

He rolls his eyes in disgust, saying, "Don't flatter yourself," and then he pulls open the door behind her, watching her fall right inside with a yelp.

---

So, about that whole being chaste thing.

That only lasts for barely another year.

It's *his* fault.

That's what Alina tells herself, anyway.

---

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** As always, comments and kudos are absolutely loved ♥

This story will eventually move to an E rating, but this chapter was basically my attempt at slow burning the mess Alina is in XD

Oh, lawd. EDIT. I think this might become 5 chapters long now. UGH stop me XD

# Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> **Trigger Warning:** There is a minor scene of attempted sexual violence, though not between the main characters in the fic. Tread with caution, but as mentioned, the key word is 'attempted'. Nothing graphic either.
>
> Also, we are going to start seeing bigger hints of Ivanlina in this chapter. Small hints, but I'm warning you now if that scares you (run away if so my pretties!! fly, fly!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He's eyeballing her skeptically over their kitchen table. The morning sun is already peeking through their large kitchen windows, sending golden light across their tiles and cabinets. "You," Ivan says as he loudly forks a pile of pancakes onto his plate. "Look awful."

The hair on the back of Alina's neck rises up immediately. Leave it to the caveman to say something totally inappropriate this early in the morning. She's barely even drank her coffee yet, so he's really playing with fire. "What a lovely thing to say to me, after I just made you breakfast. Toss yourself out the window next time for me, will you?"

Naturally, he's indelicate in all things, because she can already tell he's trying to figure out why she's so offended by what he flatly stated. "Your health is in question here. This isn't a beauty pageant. Stop being so vain."

"*My health*? Is that your new angle for insulting me?"

Ivan sips his own coffee, throat working as he swallows. He rolls his dark eyes at her, probably thinking she's overreacting to what he probably assumes is common knowledge. His thoughts are in his gaze and it speaks to the fact that he thinks she's a simpleton. "You're getting weak again. Have you used your power *at all* since we left the Little Palace?"

*Oh.* Alina sags in her seat instantly. She hasn't and he knows it. Morozova's Collar burns with awareness around her neck, delicately hidden by her lightweight blue scarf. Ever since the fateful day that Aleksander put the collar on her, Alina has found it hard to consider her sunlight *hers*.

Instead, it belongs to the Darkling.

How can she possibly explain how that feels to the man across the table from her? His small science has always been his, a complete extension of him and his personality.

She tries to avoid the conversation, not liking the way it's souring her stomach. "I don't sleep, Ivan. That could have something to do with it, don't you think?"

“I find it less likely, considering you’ve been avoiding who you are these past few months, crushing down anything that even remotely reminds you of being the Sun Summoner.” Ivan leans back in his seat, arms crossed over his chest. “You’re draining yourself. It’s only going to get worse.”

Alina’s fork scrapes across her plate roughly. “Well, I don’t know what you want me to do about it. Is it offending you? Saints forbid.”

Ivan is looking upwards towards the ceiling, as if he’s going to find patience and understanding stuck to it. “I’m telling you that it’s an easily remedied problem. Unless you want to look like a ghostly waif again. That’s your prerogative.”

Why does he need to make sense? Hm? *Why?* It’s nauseating and Alina wants to reach over and stab him with her fork. Looking inside herself, she realizes the feeling of exhaustion is familiar. It’s not just because she’s exhausted and in dire need of another good night’s sleep, but also because she’s trying to keep her sunlight locked up in some tight little ball.

As if out of sight, out of mind is going to do her any good.

She knows what he’s getting at now and somehow, she thinks he has more selfish motives for it. “You want me to use my sunlight again. That’s what you’re saying. Even if I were inclined to entertain this awful idea, where the hell am I going to use it? Not in here! Kinda easy to see a big ball of unusual light glowing out of the windows. I can almost imagine it now. Someone will see it and think, *oh yes, that’s completely normal.* Really.”

Wonderful, now Ivan looks like he wants to reach across the table and clobber her. With his arms crossed the way they are, Alina can see the way the fingers of his left hand are tightening over his right bicep, like he’d enjoy knocking some sense into her.

Well, she’s gotten her shit rocked by him before -*cue Fedyor’s most unfortunate funeral and the inappropriate debacle that followed*- and Alina is in no rush to get that fist in her face again any time soon.

With some type of herculean effort, Ivan forces himself to relax the tension in his body, possibly noting the apprehensive way she’s watching him. There are days he enjoys intimidating her, gets a kick out of it, but mostly Alina thinks he’s trying to adjust down a bit more. Maybe he’s starting to see her more as a person and less as an unruly prisoner that he can yank around.

Small steps.

Ivan’s low voice is very purposely even, as if he’s trying to maintain some illusion of politeness with her. “We can go out to the forest; it’s secluded enough for our purposes. I can keep watch while you do…whatever you feel like doing.”

The very idea of using her power makes her uneasy and off-balance. She hasn’t touched it in so long, just due to the fact that using her power feels wrong, it feels *slimy*. Aleksander’s fingerprints are all over it. “I don’t want to.”

“Nothing you say ever surprises me,” he drawls unkindly. “It’s my job to protect you and this is part of your well-being. You’ll do as you’re told.”

Alina snorts into her coffee. “Oh, I’m *sorry*. I guess the choice was never mine in this matter, I take it? Thank you, *King Ivan*, for telling me how I’m allowed to live my life.”

“You have tomorrow off. We’ll go then.”

The way he says it proves he has no interest in hearing another complaint on the matter. Alina grits her teeth and gives him her worst scowl. She may as well get something out of this if he’s going to be making demands. “You know, I think having a good night’s rest would possibly improve my health too, don’t you think?”

He’s focused on her again, no longer seeking patience from the cracks in the ceiling. He waits expectantly and Alina realizes in horror that he’s not going to make it easy on her.

“If you need something from me,” he says in that no nonsense tone of his. “You have to *ask*.”

Alina feels her stomach twist uncomfortably, staring down at her plate. The syrup covering her pancakes is dark and perfect. Is this some sort of stupid power game he’s playing with her? He wants her to admit *out loud* that she *needs something* from him? He wants her to literally come to him and beg him to use his heartrending on her so she can sleep in peace? The scoundrel.

She looks away from him, humiliated and bitter about it. Her pride won’t let her say a damn thing, not right now. She shrugs and noncommittally says, “Fine.”

“*Fine*.”

They allow a momentary silence to fall over them. The scrape of their silverware on their plates

“These are good,” he murmurs, staring down at his plate.

The tense air evaporates almost immediately.

Alina demurely pops another piece of her pancake into her mouth, chewing. “Thanks for acknowledging that.”

“The coffee though-”

“Saints, man, just stop while you’re ahead,” Alina says dryly.

A little hint of a smirk pulls at the corner of his mouth. She kinda hates how he looks when he does that.

It almost makes him look *approachable*.

Which is not acceptable. At all.

He's never been impressed with her and that's perfectly fine, because she's never been impressed with him either.

Intimidated? *Sure*. Impressed? Not a *chance*.

He's got his arms folded across his chest with that typical aloof expression gracing his stony features as he watches her. Ivan's leaning his hip against an old tree stump, where he's *supposed* to be making sure no one from town comes stumbling upon them. Instead, he's eyeballing Alina doubtfully and it's grating on her nerves.

She's sitting cross-legged on a gigantic root from one of the ancient trees that stretches overhead, trying to garner up enough nerve to reach inside herself and call forth what she doesn't want to *bring forth*. He's making her self-conscious and she *doesn't like it*.

*How am I supposed to create any sunlight if he's over there, judging me? I already don't want to do this and he's making it worse,* Alina thinks grumpily.

"Go do something," she snaps a little more waspishly than intended.

"I can watch for intruders from here," he replies blandly. "Any day now would be nice. Did you forget how this works already?"

She grits her teeth, feeling her shoulders hunching up with reluctance. It's not that she doesn't know. It's not that she forgot. It's more so that it doesn't feel like it belongs to her anymore and it constantly reminds her of what Aleksander has made her do in the past.

How he's taken her light and twisted it into something it was never meant to be.

Alina could have saved the world; instead Aleks wanted to bring it to its knees.

Inhaling slowly, trying to give herself the confidence to move forward, Alina closes her eyes, envisioning a small orb of sunlight. She feels a flicker of *something* inside her and for a moment, she quails, not quite ready to press forward.

Not ready to take charge of who she is.

She opens her eyes slightly and sneaks another look at Ivan again, feeling her heart leap up in her throat. "*Stop* watching me! I can't do anything with you *watching*," she tells him, catching him glancing at her out of the corner of his eye again. "You're the lookout, aren't you? Go lookout!"

He makes a noise of overdone exasperation, uncrossing his arms and turning completely away from her.

*About time.*

Feeling a bit of the pressure taken off her spine, Alina closes her eyes again and sets to work, concentrating. It isn't hard to call forth her power; it's more so that's she's blocking herself. Deep inside, she can feel the burning power, the call of the sun, the urge to set it free.

To just let it be pure light once again; not a weapon. To pretend that it doesn't belong to the Darkling.

*It's mine, it's just me, the Darkling's not here, he's not calling it forth, I am just me and this is* ***for me,*** Alina mentally repeats to herself until she feels a spark between her fingers.

Finally, for the first time in months, she pulls forth the sunlight from inside of her, glittering and pure, ignoring how cruelly this power has been abused for years. It sparkles and dazzles, even though she keeps it small, no larger than a tiny ball of yarn.

It twinkles a little, sending beautiful flares of light outward.

She's forgotten how lovely it can be, when it's just her. When it isn't being used against her. Alina finds herself smiling brightly, a genuine expression of joy. There's no taint of darkness on this small exertion of power; the Darkling is not in control here.

Alina is.

Quite by accident, Alina finds herself glancing at her companion again and finds herself unexpectedly meeting Ivan's dark gaze once more. He's facing her again, his eyes trained on her with a certain intensity, as if he's unable to look away- and maybe he doesn't want to.

There's something she can't read, something unfamiliar written there on his face, and Alina finds herself unable to concentrate on her small ball of sunlight. It flickers out of existence with a soft pop, casting them back into the shadow of the trees.

Alina's heart is pounding

"You're supposed to be watching the road," she whispers without any heat behind her words.

"It's fine." He looks away from her, as if she's suddenly painful to look at. "I would have felt the heartbeat of anyone coming close."

The normal sounds of the forest surround them. Birds chirping and squirrels darting from tree to tree. An animal squawking somewhere. No sounds of other humans. As Ivan said; he would have been able to feel someone approaching.

*But, could he, while distracted the way he was?* Alina finds herself pondering carefully.

"Do I have to do more?" She asks him. This was his awful idea, after all. Awful, because he *sucks*. Not because she didn't actually enjoy it for a hot moment there.

He says no and jerks his head towards the way they came, gesturing for them to go back to the village. They start the trek through the trees, twigs and branches snapping underfoot as they go. For the most part, they don't speak, but eventually Ivan has to go and open his mouth.

“You haven’t looked like that, since the first Winter Fete you attended,” he utters, voice devoid of any particular emotion. Purposely. He’s rather good at hiding his feelings.

The first Winter Fete? That’s going waaaay back in time.

“Looked how?” She’s genuinely curious about what he might say. Maybe he’ll say she looked like a glittering stage monkey? The possibilities are endless with him.

Instead of blowing her appalling expectations out of the water, Ivan simply says, “Proud.”

They return home quietly and Alina realizes with a dull sensation in her chest that he’s right. *Again*. She’s not felt good about herself in a long time. Ever since Aleksander took her and turned her into…into this tool for him to use…some prize he can adore and parade around, she’s stopped being proud of who she is.

Instead, she started hating herself.

---

---

For once, instead of a nightmare, she’s visited by a very old memory.

*“You really have to dig through all that arrogant bullshit of his, but reality is somewhere underneath,” Fedyor said to her with a charming laugh. His cologne, some fascinating mix of clove, blood orange, and cardamom, filled her nose delightfully as they glided across the dancefloor. The glitter of jewels and decorated lanterns was near blinding. “If you’re brave enough to look for it.”*

*“I don’t want to look for it,” she’d told him, leaning in to breathe the words into his ear as they spun across the dancefloor. He was a fabulous dancer. Her favorite, aside from Aleksander. “Besides, it sounds positively laborious.”*

*“Oh, I know all the right tricks to make it easy,” Fedyor replied with that wide smile, bright in the ballroom itself. Ivan, naturally, was glowering at Alina from Aleksander’s side, completely ignoring some foreign dignitary talking to them.*

*Baring her teeth in a rather unkind smile, Alina said, “I don’t need to dig for a damn thing to know what he’s thinking now.”*

*Fedyor didn’t even have to glance in Ivan’s direction. “Is he eviscerating you with his eyes? Poor girl.”*

*Alina tried to pull away from his grip. “Stop dancing with me if you feel so bad.”*

*He winked at her slyly, holding fast, pulling her to his chest. Oh, she **loved** that cologne. “Where’s the fun in that, love?” Then, he sobered a little. “You should really practice your smile in the mirror. It’s not meeting your eyes anymore. People will notice.”*

*“You assume I care what people notice about me.”*

*“You must care about something, Alina.”*

*The unpleasant expression of false amusement crossed her features again. “That’s the thing about being the Sun Summoner. It’s not in my power to care anymore.”*

*“May I cut in, Kaminsky?” Aleksander’s voice was cool, like a dream.*

*Without faltering, Fedyor handed Alina over, carefully schooling his emotions. He bowed slightly. “Of course. She’s all yours.”*

*The dream wavered violently, because this was something that didn’t actually happen. Aleksander didn’t ask to dance with her that night. Alina frowned, because this was all wrong-*

*Aleksander leaned forward, his breathe hot on her neck, leaving her shivering with desire. His voice, low and private in her ear, like a promise. “When are you coming home to me?”*

Alina wakes with a loud gasp of horror and she lights a candle immediately, seeking to chase the shadows in her room away.

With her heart beating painfully against her ribcage, like a prisoner trying to escape, Alina looks at the wall she shares with Ivan’s room. Wills him to get out of bed and come check in on her, to fix her up nice and easy. She *wants* him to.

A few minutes pass, her chest feeling uncomfortable from her rapid heartbeat. He doesn’t come to her door. Which is *infuriating*.

It’s probably worse that she wants him to come to her. Even if she hates the idea of being heartrended, despite the fact that heartrenders have always put her on edge, she still wants him to help her.

She finds herself remembering his arrogant comment. *“If you need something from me. You have to ask.”*

If he damn well thinks she’s marching to his bedroom and begging him to help her, he’s completely mistaken. No, no sir. No, thank you. She will not humiliate herself in such a fashion! Which, is what he wants, naturally. Gets his jollies off by seeing her made less, she bets. The brute.

Then again, where the hell has he been the past few decades? Picking flowers? So much of her pride has been shattered the past few years, that if Alina had a *kruge* for each time it happened, she’d be richer than the Darkling.

So, she doesn’t pass out again until early dawn, when exhaustion takes her for an hour, only until the light of dawn wakes her again.

---

He's downright awful in the morning, but then, when isn't he?

There's a certain glimmer of mocking in his dark hazel eyes that Alina doesn't like when Ivan asks, "How did you sleep last night?"

The nerve. As if he doesn't know!

"Oh, like an angel," Alina replies as she prepares to leave for the shop, working at fixing the silky scarf around her neck, the blue and gold one Genya had given her. All for the purpose of helping her hide her greatest shame; the collar of bone. Ivan's eyes flicker to her busy fingers briefly before he holds her gaze.

It's almost like he wants her to *ask*. It's almost like he's lording it over her head. The whole, *I have the power to help you, all you have to do is bend the knee and pledge your allegiance.*

Alright. Not that dramatic, but it's the impression Alina is getting.

Regardless, he better be ready, because she might just be weak enough to take him up on it one of these desperate nights.

~*~

After the whole '*drag my woman home*' incident from the shop a week prior, Alina has found herself glad that Viktor, for what it's worth, has been a good sport about the whole thing.

Alina had been certain she would receive the cold shoulder or the third degree from him, maybe even some snide comment about 'stepping out on her man' with her co-worker. Because *really*. It couldn't have looked good, having Alina entertaining his flirtations all those weeks, only for him to find out she had a 'significant other' waiting for her at home.

Even if, *oh*, Ivan is *not* her significant other. He just plays a jilted lover to the tee and it's kinda scary.

Despite all this, Viktor has remained friendly. It seems the charming boy was raised right by his mother and has some good grace and class. Aleksander might even be impressed with his poise.

They're working through some commissions together, Alina teaching Viktor the best way to shade the map during the more detailed phases when he finally brings it up. "…so, how long have you been together?"

She's not stupid, she's been waiting for it to come up for a few days now. "Ivan and I?"

"Yeah. He, *ah*, seemed like he had his back up a bit that night when he came by."

"That's a polite way to put it," Alina mutters. What sort of story can she make up about them? "Don't take offense, he's always been like that. We're complicated. We've been

together for *years*."

That's not entirely a lie, actually. They have been together for years, *together at the Darkling's side*. Minor details, no need to bring up that whole mess.

Timur, the shop owner, pokes his head into the work room. "You two can start closing up. I've got to get home to the missus. Anniversary night and all that…can't be late."

Alina laughs. "We've got you covered, Timur. Go on home."

When they finish packing up the shop, making sure specific valuables are locked away, Viktor pauses by the door with Alina. The night sky looms overhead. "It's out of my way, but do you…do you want me to walk you home? I mean, your guy isn't wrong. There's been some crimes on the rise-"

Alina doesn't even want to consider how Ivan would react if she allowed Viktor to walk her home. "You know, that's really generous of you, but he'd probably toss you into the true sea."

Viktor gives a look of confusion. "The true sea?"

*Doh*. She's always forgetting that there's no reason to say that anymore; the Fold isn't an un-sea to be crossed in the middle of Ravka anymore, so someone Viktor's age would likely be unfamiliar with the term. He might not have even be alive when that was a thing.

*Ew*. Now Alina is starting to feel creepy. How on earth did Aleksander ever look at her without finding their massive age difference to be unusual? He has centuries of experience, where she has a large handful of decades and already, she's seeing adult people as inexperienced.

Laughing it off, Alina shrugs and says, "It's an old saying in the East. Don't mind me and my oddities. Anyway, *thanks*. But no thanks. I don't want Ivan to get the wrong idea and knock you into the next century." Because he'd do it.

Making a soft huff of amusement, Viktor nods. "Yeah. He does seem to be the type to enjoy a brawl." He gestures to his slim hands, more suited to wielding a stylus between them. "I am not, however."

*Oh, yes. He'd thrash you like a limp noodle*, Alina finds herself thinking with amusement. "Have a goodnight. I'll be fine," she says instead.

They go their separate ways, off into the night.

It isn't that it's a far walk home from the shop, but there's so many dark alleys to avoid on the way. Alina tries to choose paths that don't take her directly off the main road, even if it would get her back faster. Staying on the better lit path has worked stellar for her thus far these past few months.

At least, it seems, until now.

Out of nowhere, just as she's passing another alley by, firm hands reach out and yank her into the darkness. A grimy hand goes over her mouth and another around her waist, picking her up off her feet as she shrieks uselessly into the hand.

Her fight or flight instincts come to the forefront immediately as she does whatever she can to get loose. She kicks hard until she hears someone grunt in pain. Moments after, she's punched in the gut hard enough to make her lose the air in her lungs. She spits and gasps into the foul hand covering her mouth, trying to breathe again.

"Man, we've got us a fighter, don't we?" A man chuckles gruffly, alcohol hovering in the night air.

There's an answering laugh. "That we do. A little wildcat."

Alina snarls furiously, trying to kick outward again. She can't overpower two men like this, arms trapped at her sides.

Her bag of coin is taken from her immediately, and she almost feels better thinking that all that's happening is a simple mugging.

Which, also sucks, not just because it's happening, but because Ivan warned her about this very situation. Oh, he's going to feel *very superior* when her robbed ass gets home.

Only. It seems that mugging is not the only thing on the agenda here tonight, much to her dismay. Even though it's dark, she can tell there are two men, and one is leaning forward, examining her face. "Not bad for a small waif. Let's see what's under your clothes, pretty thing."

A wave of sickness crashes over Alina and instantly she bites the hand covering her mouth, screaming, for all she's worth, hoping someone might hear her. This is *not* happening. Absolutely *not*.

They get her on her back, one man holding her wrists so tightly that she's nearly seeing stars of agony. Is he crushing her wrists? Are they broken? "Let go," she snaps hoarsely, thrashing. "Take my money and get lost, you bastards!"

The other attacker is leaning over her, tying to get her legs under control. Alina has no intention of making it easy for him, catching him under his chin with the toe of her boot. She hears him curse wetly; he's bitten his tongue.

*You could end this all,* slithers through her mind like a poison. It's quickly accompanied by the thought that if Alina uses her sunlight, she'll alert everyone to her existence in this town and then the villagers -*being that no one is a fan of the Sun Summoner these past few decades*- will haul out a pyre for her, burn her at the stake, and then Ivan will have to literally have to kill everyone and that is not what she wants for this sleepy town-

"Hold still, girl," the thug maneuvering his way between her thrashing legs growls. "It will be easier for you if you just hold still."

His friend tightens his grip on her wrists, so hard that Alina is certain he's going to snap her delicate bones into nothing. It feels like she's trapped in a vise, everything crunching together painfully. She kicks out, but to no avail.

"Get off of me," Alina snarls, thrashing like a fish out of water. "You disgusting piece of trash-"

Something cold and icy gets pressed against her throat, making her go still as a bone. "You feel that?" Her attacker presses it against her hard, hard enough that she feels a slight sting where he's nicked her flesh. "Keep up the funny business and I slit you from end to end."

Breathing heavily, allowing all the hate she's feeling to fill her eyes, Alina says, "Where's the fun in it for you then, if I'm dead? Or are you the type that prefers rigor mortis to set in first?" Her heart is thundering and her blood has gone utterly cold. It's interesting that there was a time she would have welcomed a quick death, but now-

The man backhands her hard and she briefly sees stars, instantly regretting calling him a necrophiliac. "You mouthy bitch," the man roars, "You'll get what you deserve-"

A strangled noise erupts from his chest and he freezes over her. His yellowed, alcohol filled eyes go wide, bulging out in agony as he suddenly pitches forward, vomiting blood up onto Alina's clothes. His friend going equally still where he's holding her wrists in place. Rough hands go slack, releasing her.

She wails in disgust, scrunching her face up. The second man tips away, gurgling. Both men go as still as a grave and Alina is left panicking. A weird little noise of confusion and dismay is building in her chest. There's a dark silhouette at the entrance of the alley, standing over them.

*I've never been happier to see him.*

Ivan yanks the first attacker's body off of her and tosses him backwards like trash. The body lands in a heap.

Alina stares, feeling the stickiness of blood going cool on her. It's disgusting. Despite that, all she feels is relief seeing him. She feels enough relief that she's not sure if she wants to cry and hug Ivan or just curl up in a ball of self-pity. It's a hard choice, because she's certain he would rather shake her like a naughty child right about now. "Are they…?"

"Dead? Yes." The words are bitten off and short, betraying the fact that Ivan's likely hiding a wave of unpleasant emotion under the surface of his stern features. His eyes are too dark for her to see any feeling in them, dark like a shark's. "You never listen, do you?" Ivan's voice is rough, like a razorblade.

Her heart is racing like a rabbit, thudding around in her ribcage. It's like being thrown in cold water, being reminded of what a skilled killing machine he is, even if he's protecting her. Ridiculously, she wants to cry, mainly from the shock of what just nearly happened to her. That, and seeing her attackers killed so simply, without effort on Ivan's part. She starts

righting her clothes, feeling hot tears prickling at her eyes. She blinks rapidly, not wanting him to see.

Above all, she never likes Ivan seeing her weak. Especially not when it proves that he's *right*.

*"He's always right. And even if he isn't, he's not going to apologize for being wrong," Fedyor told her as the wind shifted his midnight locks. "You'll hate him for it, just a bit."*

*"Oh, I hate him a lot, even without that minor detail," Alina had muttered, gazing out at the still lake.*

His jaw is clenched as he watches her sit up gingerly. "What did I tell you about being out this late after dark, Starkov?"

The fact that he's addressing her by her last name only proves out how pissed off he is at her. He's level ten grade mad right about now and Alina's legs are feeling a little shaky.

"You are a *helpless little girl*." He comes closer until he's towering over her, all menace and rage. He pulls her up to her feet. "Every time I think you can handle more slack on your damn leash, you go and throw yourself in harm's way. It's almost like you *want trouble*."

"I do not go looking for trouble!" She shoves him back hard, gasping at the sudden pain in her wrists that the action causes. "That's a blatant lie."

"Alright, what is it then?" His eyes are like flint, voice as dark as a storm. He steps right back up to her, close enough that she has to stumble backwards until her back hits the brick wall. "Do you enjoy having me breathing down your neck? Having me worrying about your next mistake?"

Her eyes fall to his mouth, with is close enough at the moment, her emotions running high and tight. Her gaze flickers upwards quickly to meet his and her heart flips nervously at what she sees there. She's not sure what she sees, *actually*, but he saw her glance at his cruelly sneering lips and now he's glancing down at hers.

Noticing her, noticing him and the stinging awareness-

He looks away from her sharply, grimacing. "You are a menace," he mutters.

"I'm sorry," she says it and she means it. "This has never h-happened before." She'd really like a hug, but he's the least huggable man she knows. Mal would have hugged her, assured her, told her everything was going to be alright. She sniffles weakly, hating herself again. Mal's not here and he's never going to be with her again. "You were right," She says it like it's going to kill her. "I shouldn't be coming back this late. Not with all the trouble lately."

Even with his jaw still clenched, Ivan manages to sigh, hearing the tremble in her voice. "Let's get you home and fix you up. And get you a clean set of clothes."

The walk home is thankfully uneventful.

He situates her on their couch after she changes and hands her a bottle of *kvas,* which she gratefully accepts, taking a few solid pulls from it, embracing the burn in her throat.

“What hurts?” He asks her lowly, kneeling at her feet, large hands on her knees.

She likes him down there, she thinks vaguely, the alcohol taking hold of her. “My wrists are in bad shape,” she says with a cracked voice. “Can you fix them?”

Ivan takes them into his hands and Alina allows him to use what healing capabilities he has. The strange sensation of the bruising being slowly healed is unusual, but welcome and Ivan pushes away the worst of the swelling and heals the dark bruising from the attacker’s grasp on her wrists.

He eases her pain, slowly pushing it away.

Mind growing fuzzy with the *kvas*, Alina finds herself focusing on something he said earlier, when he was hot with anger. “Do you really worry about me?”

Looking up at her sharply, Ivan pauses in his ministrations and that’s how Alina knows that she’s caught him in something real, something he never meant to reveal. His jaw works as he chews on his response, but in the end, he says, “You must have bonked your head pretty hard if you think I said that.”

She didn’t bonk her head at all, but she’ll allow his typical emotional evasion tactic.

“I trust you can put yourself to bed,” he says gruffly instead, standing up sharply, leaving her. Putting space between them as quickly as he can.

She almost asks him to help her sleep.

*Almost.*

---

---

She finds herself wanting to apologize for being such a difficult, stress inducing mess.

Not that Alina is going to say anything to his face, because no. That is not ever happening, not in this life or the next.

Instead, she’s reminded of her dream of Fedyor a few nights past, before her attack in the street after hours. It sparks an idea that lands in her in the local perfumery, having an imitation of his cologne made for her to take home.

The first mix is close, but Alina shakes her head and says, “More clove. It’s like, warm and juicy all at once. Dripping buckets of blood orange and warm spice to even it out.”

The perfumer nods and makes a few adjustments with her oils and essences. “How’s this?”

Alina leans forward and inhales, eyes fluttering closed. Her heart tugs painfully and she finds herself smiling in memory. “That’s it. That’s perfect.” *Fedyor.* “How much do I owe you?”

Paying up and taking her lovely bottle of perfume away, Alina goes home. She’s pleased to find Ivan out and about, his room wide open and empty. She glances around the apartment just to be sure he isn’t brooding somewhere out of sight and out of mind.

This is a surprise and she intends to keep it that way.

Sneaking into his room, Alina gently spritzes the cologne on Fedyor’s *kefta*, delicately, just so there’s a ghostly whiff of it. After a moment of consideration, she also does a fine mist of Ivan’s bed.

Alina can be nice when she wants to be and she knows it’s going to ease him immensely. If she’s lucky, he won’t even realize what she’s done. She doesn’t want recognition for it. She just wants…to give him something back.

She knows she would have given anything to breathe in the familiar scent of Mal’s skin, the first few years after his execution. Her throat tightens, thinking of him. She can’t remember the clean scent that always reminded her of him. It’s a memory lost to age and time.

Alina’s afraid that she’ll eventually forget his face. The idea terrifies her and fills her with an old sort of sorrow that always tugs at her heart.

The anniversary of his death is coming soon. She never forgets. Forcing her feelings down into a little box, Alina leaves Ivan’s room and returns to her own, sitting on her bed to flip through some of Mal’s old tracker notebooks, running her fingers over his scrawling handwriting.

A tear drips down her cheek, landing on the parchment.

~*~

Later that night, after dinner, she listens to Ivan walk into his room, the familiar cadence of his boots on the wood floors more familiar to her than her own heartbeat. She hears the way he pauses. The sudden catch of his breath.

Alina bites her lower lip and tries not to feel too pleased with herself.

---

---

She dreams of darkness and smoke. It’s familiar and it fills her with dread, even as it draws her in. As always, the Darkling is a magnetizing force, even as he repulses her. She feels him, even if she can’t see him.

*Alina,* his midnight voice seems to whisper from every dark corner of her mind.

She doesn't respond. A part of her wants to and always will. Another part of her can't bear it.

She wonders if he feels a thing at all, about her being gone. Out of his grasp. So close, yet so far.

Does it pain him, or is he content, knowing that no matter where she runs, she'll always end up back in his control?

*Come back to me, love.*

She wakes up, panting.

//////////////////////////////////////////////////

It starts relatively innocent. As most things do.

//////////////////////////////////////////////////

It's the same day as it is every single year, but it never gets any easier for her. She doesn't go into the shop, instead opting to spend time in the field with Mal's old sketchpads. She looks at his tracking notes, touches her fingertips to the marks on the parchment.

She tries to not get the sketchpad wet when she cries, alone in the high grass with nothing but the birds above her, the soft wind in her hair.

It's the silence that she enjoys, out in the tall, waving prairie grass that obscures her from view. The cloud and the sun are high overhead, but she's far from the world and nothing can touch her in her misery.

Mal used to run through fields like this with her, when they were children. Playing tag, or hide and seek. Holding her hand and never letting go.

It seems like so long ago and she chokes back another sob.

She gets home before dusk, just as the sun is beginning to set. With a numb brain, she cooks and cleans, wanting her mind to be empty of everything. Not wanting to remember the way he died, the words he said to her.

The way she begged the Darkling to spare him. How he ignored her pleas.

When Ivan gets home from doing whatever he was off doing for the day, he takes one glance at her and smoothly *avoids*. Smart of him. In another miraculously smart move, he *actually uncorks a bottle of wine* for her, leaving it out on the table.

Wordlessly, Alina takes what she's being offered and determines maybe he's good for something after all. The Saints know he was absolutely useless the day Mal was killed, so he may as well make up for how he treated her somehow.

He doesn't comment on her drinking from the bottle during dinner. He doesn't comment on her puffy eyes. He also doesn't make a single complaint about the meal itself.

Perhaps even more astounding; he helps her put the dishes away, wordlessly.

Alina retreats to her room for a short period, even though it's still early in the evening. She sits on her bed and wraps her arms around herself, as if that's going to provide her with some form of comfort. It doesn't, *not really*.

It's not the same. It doesn't feel like holding Mal in her arms. It doesn't even feel like being held by someone else. It's a lonely, sad little action that provides almost no value, aside from a poor attempt of self-soothing.

For a few years, she even tolerated Genya sitting at her bedside in the Little Palace, on this very day, stroking her hair, even though she knew nothing would ever make them right again. It had felt nice, if only a little, to have someone running their fingers through her hair, not telling her any lies that everything would get better someday.

Slowly, mind foggy with misery and wine, Alina sits up in her bed, staring at the opposite wall. She slowly looks at her bedroom door and considers. It's a terrible idea and she doesn't care. Leaving her room once more, she slinks out into the main living space of the apartment, looking for Ivan.

He's sitting on the couch, looking through some newspaper, still ignoring her, even though he senses her approaching. He knows she's upset, but he's pretending he's unaware, as if that gives her some privacy in their small apartment.

He probably doesn't know what's wrong with her, but he knows enough about her physiology to know when she's *sad*. He's not the sort of man to comfort, but he is giving what he thinks she needs; space.

Only…only she doesn't want the space anymore.

She approaches him and sees the way his shoulders go even more tense. Alina ignores that and hops clumsily over the back of the couch, sliding between him and the cushion. He scoots forward sharply, but he allows her to dig her fingers into the knots of muscle on his upper back.

He is tense *as hell*.

"Stop." He says flatly, trying to twist away from her.

"Oh, be quiet you overly tense rock," she says, unwilling to let him back her off. In fact, she's the one who needs the contact, *wants the comfort* of human touch. "Be still and you might even *like it*."

He growls a little in rejection of this plot of hers, but he does as she says.

Mindlessly, focusing on his shoulders, enjoying the simple physicality of touching another human, Alina allows herself to sink into working out the tightness she finds there. For a

minute, she doesn't really even see him in front of her; she sees a simple memory of her doing the same for Mal, the way he'd scoff and complain that her tiny little bony fingers would cause more harm than good. Then, Mal would smile at her and wink.

She blinks back tears and curses herself when a self-pitying sound of sorrow escapes her. Ivan stiffens under her touch, tries to look over his shoulder at her. "Are you *crying*?"

"No. Of course not." She lies even though her heart will tell him differently.

Pressing into a particular spot along his trapezius, Alina listens to the satisfied noise he tries to bite back, the way his breathing shifts and changes. If she focuses on him, she's not focusing on what she once could have had with Mal. Or perhaps, if she focuses hard *enough*, she can imagine he's a man that he *isn't*.

Her forehead tips forward and bumps the nape of his neck as she digs her thumbs into his lower back. Her head feels so heavy and he's probably going to mind if she rests on him, but oh well. A single tear drips from her eyelashes and splatters him. Alina curses that tear for betraying her, because Ivan figures it out quick enough.

"He died today." Ivan utters as she works out another tight knot of muscle in his back. He grunts as the knot releases. "Your tracker."

The half-empty bottle of wine on the kitchen table speaks to her mental state on the matter. Alina hums softly against the nape of his neck, inadvertently inhaling the familiar, wintry fresh scent of him. She doesn't remember how Mal smelled and it makes her grit her teeth, fighting emotional pain down.

By the end of it, her fingers are tired and she wraps her arms around Ivan from behind, listening to the way he sighs with vexation at her action. Her cheek is pressed to his back and she gets to listen to his heartbeat, gets to feel him breathe. He has a nice, strong heartbeat, thudding softly against her ear. He's so warm and she's been so lonely. One of his large hands touches where hers are clasped on his front. "Starkov," he says quietly, making as if to peel her off of him. He's going to have to peel her off like a leech.

She tightens herself to him, her legs fully wrapped around him from behind as she continues with her full body hug. After all this time, it feels nice to hold a man, even if he's not the one she's been thinking of on this very day. "Please, just let me," she begs him softly. Then, she throws his own words back at him. "I need this."

His shoulders sag in defeat and she's too weary.

"I miss him," she utters, fighting to keep her tone straight. "I wish I didn't feel this way anymore."

Ivan's chest rumbles against her hands as he replies. "I know."

He's probably thinking of his own loss, probably vaguely counting how long she's been mourning in this fashion. He's likely thinking about how he's doomed to be just like her… and he's only one year into his own devastating loss of Fedyor.

Alina is a dark mirror of misery, a vision of a future that awaits him.

////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////

Things become a little less innocent, as all things must, in due time

////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////

They return to the forest again, all in the effort of having Alina keep up with her small science. She'd always been a bit of a pale, waif of a girl, back in the days of the orphanage. Interestingly enough, it was from suppressing herself and what she was that made her so worn and weary back then.

It seems, the same problem is coming back to bite her in the ass now that she's been avoiding herself and trying to pretend she isn't a Grisha. The small display she performed a few days past wasn't enough, but it certainly was a start to getting her back to normal.

Genya always said there was a healthy, lovely glow about her, when she lived in the Little Palace. When Alina first arrived and accepted being a Grisha. Accepted her purpose.

This time around, it isn't quite as difficult for her to call the sunlight, to create a small ball of glittering gold. Then, she makes two, allowing them to float around the low boughs of the trees. It's a perfect day, so the glow of her sunlight won't be too obvious, if someone where to pass by.

Not that they'd get close enough to catch her in action. Ivan stands guard like the gargoyle that he is, one part of him always attuned to her, even as he listens for extra human heartbeats on the path. He seems to like watching her work with her small science in this manner.

"Must be odd for you," she calls out to him.

"What's odd?"

"Seeing me do this without being forced to do it."

He snorts derisively. "You wouldn't be forced to do anything if you would just do as you're told."

Alina flicks one of her small glowing balls at him, letting it harmlessly spin around him quickly. "See, just 'doing as I'm told' sounds awfully like being forced to do something I don't want to do. Using the Fold as a weapon was pretty low on my list."

"This is an old argument. Old and *tired*." He scowls menacingly. "Will you get this stupid ball away from me? Are you trying to blind me?"

She allows the small ball of sunlight to wink out. “Oh, you’d know if I were trying to blind you.”

“Very comforting.”

“Says the man who is fully capable of crushing my heart.” She splits her remaining ball of light into two, making them dance. “You give me all sorts of comforting fuzzies in my chest.”

“Yeah. I know that. It’s not that hard to get you excited.”

Alina feels her spine straighten at that comment. What is he getting at? Is he being serious? She looks at him briefly. Oh, Saints. *He is*. “I can’t control how fast my heart beats! Stop stroking your ego; it’s too big already.”

A sneer starts shaping his lips just as something unpleasant occurs unexpectedly; the sun disappears and it starts downpouring, like some sort of unholy deluge.

*-and it’s damn cold!*

Alina shrieks in surprise, losing focus completely. Her orbs of light flicker out instantly and gigantic raindrops splatter her mercilessly. The icy water is most unwelcome and her hair plasters itself to her head almost instantly.

*It was nice out! It wasn’t supposed to rain today! Ugh. What is up with this.*

She catches sight of Ivan leaning himself under one of the larger trees, having moved the best he can to get out of the worst of it. He’s still being dripped on, but at least the heavy boughs are giving some cover. She runs over to Ivan and huddles beside him, shivering violently. It’s cold enough that their breath shows in the air.

It’s only been a few spare minutes and she’s already soaked through like a wet dog. Her shirt is completely stuck to her body most indecently, so she crosses her arms over her chest, feeling awkward.

“You’re freezing,” he mutters, noting the loud chatter of her teeth.

Nodding, she steps a little closer to his side. “And you aren’t,” she replies. “Share please?”

He makes a noise of reluctance, but he leans his back up against the large tree and his stance widens a bit, uncrossing his arms from his chest. Alina gives him a wary look, not moving from where she’s standing, soaked like a drowned rat, shivering. Ivan scoffs. “What are you waiting for? A sign from above?”

Oh, just…just like that, then?

Awkwardly stepping up to his front, Alina nearly jumps out of her skin when his arms go around her, bringing her flush. The heat of his body is only intensified when she feels an odd tug inside of her. It feels like a strange heart palpitation as the cadence of her beating heart changes to *something else*. Her blood pressure shifts and she feels like a wave of heat is running up her spine. The oddness of it eventually disappears, leaving her slowly warming.

“Ok, that felt strange,” Alina mutters, eyes even with his throat. She watches his jugular, because what else is there to stare at without craning her head backwards to meet his eyes? “What are you doing?”

“Old habit,” Ivan mutters gruffly. “Didn’t mean to.”

“Didn’t mean to *what*, exactly?”

“I synchronized our heartbeats together while working on your blood pressure.”

“You are just *so* talented,” Alina replies snidely. No wonder Aleksander always wanted him taking care of her. The man can simply do it all. A pity about the personality, but she supposes he can’t possibly be the whole package; that simply would be unfair.

He smells fabulous, by the way. That doesn’t please her in the slightest, because Alina has a small problem. The troublesome part of her that misses being close to a man is rearing its ugly unwanted head again. She misses the way it feels to be touched, to be held by one. She’s never been without someone for so long and Aleksander had always been there to fulfill *any urge* she many have had at the Little Palace. No matter how reluctant her soul was to share a bed with him, she still could never destroy the part of her that enjoyed him.

So, yes. Being this long without affectionate male contact, Alina is starting to notice Ivan. And worse; she’s beginning to think that he’s noticing her, noticing him.

Alina’s still shaking against him like a leaf, even as her body slowly begins to heat up from being ice cold. She exhales in a rush against his neck, just under his jawline. He shivers a little and Alina doesn’t think she can assume he’s cold, because he’s most decidedly *not*.

He’s like a furnace. His chest, his solid arms around her, the heated place between his thighs-

A voice that sounds suspiciously like Zoya’s echoes in her mind, like some sort of sordid commentary that Alina *never ever* asked for. The tone is snide and nasty, the way only Zoya could be. *You may need to get laid at some point, orphan. Beggars can’t be choosers and you could certainly choose worse-*

*Get out of my head, you nasty slag,* Alina finds herself thinking, absolutely mortified, wanting to throw herself into the nearest pit of shame.

There’s no avoiding the fact that he’s growing hard and Alina’s really trying to not focus on the shape of him. How can he be blamed, she’s pressed up against him, soaking wet, her shirt currently leaving almost nothing to the imagination. This situation belongs in the deepest hell possible. Alina tries to shift away a bit and Ivan sucks in a breath in a sharp hiss.

“Sorry,” he rasps a little hoarsely, his arms reflexively tightening around her.

The fact that he’s actually apologizing means he’s pretty embarrassed about it, Alina gathers.

The rain continues to pour, like a loud roaring across the leaves of the forest, splattering roughly. The air smells green and earthy. Thunder sounds somewhere in the distance.

Everything about the atmosphere screams melancholy. It reminds Alina of their souls, because they're both pretty desolate on the inside.

Even cold, empty hearts can't fight physical need.

"It's fine," she whispers, her voice nearly lost to the raging downpour. "We're fine." *We're both only human and humans don't do well without affection for long periods of time.*

The tree is against his spine, she's to his front. Ivan's got nowhere to go and Alina isn't going to move because he's warm and he feels nice. Well, apart from his *ah,* problem. She could probably do without that digging into her.

If she were a stronger woman, she'd walk off into the downpour alone and take the long route home, freeze her damn digits off, and cast down the weakness of her flesh. It appears, she's not as strong as she'd like to be.

She blames it on *so many things*.

He seems to be looking for a distraction, because Ivan suddenly says, "I've been meaning to ask you something."

Normally, her heart would leap at that -*because oh Saints what is he going to say*- but he's still controlling it. "Ask me what?"

He swallows thickly. "Did you…did you- *nevermind*. It's stupid."

"Well, now you have to tell me," she teases, trying to keep her mind off the situation they've caught themselves in. Anything to take her mind off the way his body feels against hers. The way she can feel every word he speaks vibrating against her.

Ivan sighs. "Fedyor's *kefta*. Did you…did you make it smell like him again?"

Alina presses her face against his chest, giggling a little. "Gathered up all your nerve to finally ask me? I *did*, actually. Did you like it?"

His voice is low, a sound that coils deep in Alina's belly, where it absolutely *does not* belong. His arms flex around her. "*Yes*."

Her mouth is going dry and this is absurd. This conversation is somehow not making things better; it's making things *worse*. He's not any less excited -*physically*- and Alina's mind still feels like it's racing over everything that's wrong with this situation.

Because, at the heart of it, she wants to know what he looked like, *vulnerable*, if he pressed his face to his sheets, where she also sprayed Fedyor's cologne. Did his cold heart beat just a little faster, thinking of his former lover? Did-

*You really need help, Starkov*, Zoya's voice mocks in Alina's head. Why on earth do her thoughts have to sound like Zoya of all people? *What would Aleksander think if he knew you were panting after his right-hand man, the one that he's trusted to take care of you-*

*Gross, get out of my skull, you bloody witch,* Alina argues mentally with herself.

It takes another ten long minutes for the rain to slow, tapering off into the distance. The sun begins peeking through the clouds once more, sparkling off the wet, dewy leaves. “You can let go of me now,” Alina tells him, because she can’t squirm away with the current grip he’s got on her.

His arms relax with a reluctant sort of slowness, falling away from holding her to him. Alina steps away from him, feeling her face grow red now that she’s face to face. What does someone say in a situation like this? Nothing maybe? Is that the best route to go?

She gives him a minute to gather himself again, ignoring how he has to step around the tree to adjust himself. She stares upwards, whistling an obnoxious tune as loud as she can until he hisses, “*Quit it*.”

Downright bossy, he is.

The walk back to their apartment is quiet, full of something that neither of them want to name.

Alina spends half of the journey mentally panicking, scolding herself, telling herself that she should have just froze to death, rather than press herself against him the way she did. What does he think of her now? Some other woman would have probably taken on the cold, but she chose not to.

The more she scolds herself, the more she has to remind herself that she isn’t the only one who’s probably ashamed at the moment.

When they finally make it back to their street, they make quite the scene. They arrive with boots muddied, hair wet, clothes sticking to them like a second skin, and their downstairs neighbor cackles at them the way only a seventy-year-old can.

“Oho, looks like you two lovebirds got caught in the storm. Weren’t expecting this flood, now where you?”

Alina smiles a little as she tries to manage her absolutely ridiculous hair. “Miss Katja, you know us Eastern folk can’t read the weather from the sea. You should have warned me when we left!”

The elderly flower shop owner grins widely, a few of her teeth missing. “I knew you’d be fine.” She leans closer to Alina and winks. “You’ve got your strapping lad with you.”

Alina flushes bright red and hopes that Ivan isn’t paying attention.

The older woman continues on conspiratorially, saying, “Speaking of which, can I borrow him from you for a wee bit? I have some big flower pots full of soil that I need to move out front for display. ‘fraid I can’t lift them.”

They both glance at Ivan, who appears to have been staring off into the distance quite rudely since the conversation began. Alina coughs to get his attention. When that doesn’t work, she

touches his hand, completely unprepared for the zing of awareness that passes between them.

Alina can't tell if it's because they're amplified Grisha who recently used their powers or if it's because of what passed between them under the tree. Whatever it is, the touch gets his attention and he's looking at Alina within seconds. "What?"

Katja slaps her broom against a rug, trying to get the dust out. "'Lina has given you to me, you young thing. Come help me lift pots with those nice strong arms of yours. Come on now, don't dawdle. You aren't simple; I've listened to you two go at it like snarling bears upstairs…"

The old woman waddles into her shop, expecting him to follow her. Ivan exhales, his dark eyes catching on Alina's. Her heart clenches suddenly and she fears her face might be turning red. "'*Lina*' gave me away, huh?" He snorts, eyeing Alina up and down. "I wasn't aware '*Lina*' could do that."

"I'll take you back, don't worry," Alina collects herself and pats his cheek mockingly, trying to hide how off-balance she feels. She turns on her heel to go to their front door. Feeling a little daring, because maybe it's fun to unsettle him the way she keeps getting unsettled, Alina calls out over her shoulder, "Miss Katja will get worried that I'll get cold on rainy days if I don't take you back."

Without waiting to see his face, she unlocks the front door, hearing Miss Katja crowing at Ivan in the background. "'fer crying out loud! Stop watching her and get in here, boy! Saints almighty, she'll be waiting for you when you get home, lad."

Alina tries not to feel the heat of his eyes on her spine. She shuts the door behind her without a backwards glance.

It means nothing, after all.

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** As always, comments and kudos are loved ♥ You guys are all fabulous for reading this randomly long story XD

Yup. I kept myself slow burning here.

# Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Dear Diary,* Alina thinks in a mocking tone as she stares up at the ceiling in her room. *He's being an ass again. For absolutely no discernable reason.*

She decides to stop worrying about it after stewing over it for the better part of her morning. It's not her job to worry about Ivan and labor over his bad moods. Alina has *better things to do*.

That's what she tells herself as she leaves for the day, shooting him a frown before she heads down the stairs. He doesn't acknowledge her and that *bites*.

////////////////////////////////

It turns out that while the mapmaking takes her mind off much of the abundant sorrow she carries, it doesn't fill the all holes still left in her heart.

It's a good thing that Alina eventually finds a new project to help mend that up as well.

She finds it one cloudy afternoon, walking home from the shop. Since it's early enough in the day, she takes a longer, meandering path, wandering through town. Her eyes catch on a large building, just on the outskirts of the city, with iron gates at the front. Curious, Alina walks up to it, noting the word *orphanage* across the front. Her heart clenches tightly and her throat suddenly feels thick with tears.

Mal's face, handsome and forever young, fills her mind. Her eyes sting as she thinks of their shared childhood, of all the silliness they once got up to. Before their lives were interrupted, before everything went to hell in a handbasket.

Before Alina was made into a tool of war. Before she became a Grisha, something she never wanted to be.

She remembers what it was like in the orphanage. Hers wasn't that bad, all things considered; there were worse ones out there, with terrible conditions and children receiving little care or socialization. Many of the more memorable days were when someone from the outside would come and bring games or art supplies for the children.

An idea comes to life inside of Alina. She could be that person. She could volunteer some of her spare time and teach drawing.

The idea of being able to volunteer time, especially since she's long accepted that children are not in the books for her, gives her a form of hope. Maybe she can still do some good in this world for children who have lost their parents to the endless chaos.

She's led to the office of the head matron of the orphanage, who is an aging woman with a very stern face, eyes hidden behind thick spectacles. The woman looks her up and down and gestures for Alina to sit down.

"Welcome. I'm Matron Anya. I hear you're interested in volunteering time with the children."

Alina nods, hands demurely folded in her lap. "That's right."

"How old are you?" The matron is eyeing her oddly, and Alina realizes that many young women her -*apparent*- age don't tend to volunteer time helping orphaned children. Most women her 'age' would be at home, caring for their own brood.

Alina's mouth opens and shuts as her mind races over what sort of answer this woman might accept. The matron's stare seems to see straight into her soul and somehow, she reminds Alina of Baghra. "I'm twenty-eight," she utters out dumbly, fully aware that her body looks closer to early twenties and her soul is much, *much older*.

Alina hasn't been twenty-eight for a very long time.

Those eyes narrow at her a bit. "You look younger."

Deciding that this path of conversation is likely not going to do anyone any favors, Alina sits up and straightens her posture into a confident one. "I'm a mapmaker, I work locally if you need a reference. I grew up in an orphanage and I know enrichment for children is often hard to find, with so few resources. I'd love to help with that. Art is soothing for young and old alike."

Matron Anya sits back in her seat and clasps her hands together. Her spectacles slide down her large nose, just a bit as she glances at Alina over the top of them. "The children certainly enjoy drawing, though many could use some guidance in it. Your mentorship would be appreciated, I think. Perhaps you are a little older than I thought." She leans over her dusty wooden desk and squints. "Ah. Yes. You have the eyes of an old soul. Have you no children yourself to care for?"

Again, Alina finds herself stumped briefly. What the heck is she supposed to say about that? Their town isn't large and everyone on her street has decided for themselves that she's inappropriately living in sin with Ivan- and that he needs to shit or get off the pot in regards to proposing to her. Saints, if Miss Katja asks about that one more time, Alina is going to lose it. Like the other week-

*The feisty old woman poked Alina in the side, speaking conspiratorially. "What's he waiting for? A proclamation from the King? The time is ticking girl."*

*Alina rolled her eyes and prayed for sanity and good humor. "Miss Katja, I told you this last week;* ***I*** *keep asking* ***him*** *to marry me, he just won't say yes."*

*The flower shop owner had scoffed and flapped one of her wizened hands, as if to dismiss those words. Catching sight of Ivan walking up the street, Miss Katja pointed her infamous*

*broom at him, crowing out, "Boy! Yes, I'm talking about **you**, you grumpy bear. No woman likes it when a man plays hard to get! Remember that."*

*He'd paused in his stride, right by their front door, giving Katja a look so dirty that Alina nearly fell into a heap of giggles. Then, he'd scoffed and walked into their apartment, leaving Alina with Katja. The old woman snickered. She cupped a hand around her mouth to whisper to Alina, "If that doesn't motivate him, you can always stop drinking your 'special' tea. That will solve the problem, right as rain."*

*Alina's mouth dropped open and she flushed a bit. She currently didn't have any contraceptives in the house, considering she didn't think she'd need any. "You are a scary woman, Miss Katja."*

*The flower shop owner cackled like a witch. "It's how I caught my first husband, tee hee."*

*"I will not be doing that, but thanks for the…candid advice." It was always enlightening to speak to Katja, considering Alina was likely similar in age to the elderly woman. A terrifying reminder that her life was far from normal. "Wait. First husband? How many-"*

*"Hehe…there were three. Come. Come inside for some tea. Oh, goodness, normal tea! The stories I have for you, girl…"*

-Anyway. Alina can't feasibly say she's got no children because she's 'unattached', because to all appearances in town, by this point, she *is*. "Um…we never quite found the time. With the wars."

Confusion reads in the deep grooves of Matron Anya's face. "Wars?"

Coughing into her shoulder, Alina corrects herself, "War. I meant, the war. There never was a good time. I didn't want to make more orphans, regardless. My…*uh*…significant other and I…are both former soldiers. I was a cartographer, actually."

The matron nods, as if that explains everything. "These times have been so hard on the youth of this country. It's such a pity. So many have died because of the Darkling and his thirst for power."

Alina swallows thickly, trying not to display any outward feelings on the matter. She folds her hands and waits patiently for the other woman to continue.

"Well, I'll reach out to your reference and we can go from there. What days would you like to come by and volunteer, so long as everything checks out?"

Grinning brightly, Alina tells her.

~*~

Ivan gives her a scathing look that night when she tells him about her day. "An orphanage? Really?"

It seems that the awful mood of the week is continuing and Alina is starting to get her suspicions as to why. She considers it could be that Fedyor's birthday is coming up and she reasons that it's probably making Ivan excessively sensitive. If she recalls correctly, the pair of them always took leave around this time to celebrate together. Not like he's mentioned anything about it, but it's been like walking on eggshells around him for days and that's the only thing that *possibly makes sense*.

Even the slightest step out of line has him snapping at her waspishly, like a barking dog. She's been carefully avoiding him, actually. He's been so irritable that he's not even bothered to force her out to the woods to practice her small science.

In fact, Alina would almost say he's avoiding spending any time with her.

She can only imagine that her continued restless nights aren't helping him whatsoever. He's probably been glaring at the wall they share, hearing her racing heart pounding in his skull, hating her with the power of a thousand suns. Even though he could bloody fix her problems…even if his power makes her uneasy.

Alina shrugs. "There's a lot of overflow to orphanages the past few years and not many resources-"

"…and this is your problem, why?"

"It's called volunteering," Alina tells him sarcastically. "Ever heard of giving back to the community? So many of those children grow up without a loving home."

He sighs, as if she's being some sort of bleeding heart, something he can't stand. "Tragedy happens. You can't save every stray you come across."

"Yeah, well. I was one of those strays, once." Her voice tapers off, remembering. "I only ever had Mal. He was the only family I really ever had."

Ivan's tone softens only moderately. "I didn't mean it like that."

Well, he's fired her up already with his typical arrogance, the feeling that always seems to hover about the proud line of his shoulders, dark in his gaze. Not only that; she's tired of playing nice with this attitude of his. If he has no intention of cleaning his act up, Alina isn't going to keep handling him with kid gloves. Her voice goes sharp, offended. "You did. You've always looked down on me and people like me. All you care about is the Grisha being on top and nothing about anyone *else*."

"I had family who weren't Grisha," he reminds her, something unpleasant crossing his face, like a warning flag. "They served in the First Army. They *all* died."

Leaning over the table, baring her teeth angrily, Alina says, "Well, maybe they wouldn't have had to die if your beloved Black Heretic hadn't created the Fold in the first place."

His voice goes sharp, like a warning. "I advise that you shut your mouth before you say something you regret."

She hasn't been this angry at him in months and the feeling is nearly uncomfortable. It's too much, it's a fiery feeling trying to tear its way out of her guts and she doesn't like feeling it. "You know I'm right. You support that monster and you know what? It's his fault Fedyor didn't get to live a nice peaceful life-"

His hands slam down loudly on the table and he leans forward into her face, growling, "Now, you need to go before I do something to you that *I'll* regret."

"Going to hit me, Ivan?" She shouldn't be goading him like this, but now she's can't stop.

His teeth flash dangerously. "I don't know, Starkov. Is that what you're aiming for tonight?"

Suddenly wanting nothing more than to dig her fingers into his face, Alina steps away from the table quickly, needing to put distance between them. And fast. *That was stupid, you knew he's in this shit mood all week and you go and verbally knife him. Way to go, Alina.*

*Yeah, well. I'm tired of it.*

"You're a bastard," she hisses as she storms back to her room.

"Ask me if I care," he barks after her.

Slamming the door behind her, Alina crosses through her bedroom and goes out onto her balcony to sit and stare up at the stars.

*That was possibly the most stupid fight we've ever had,* she finds herself musing as the red-hot anger inside of her begins to ease. She takes in deep breaths, trying to cool herself down. Her pulse is pounding in her temple, a headache starting. *We're running out of crap to stay mad at each other about, so we're dragging up old dirt that has no business being discussed.*

That, and she has a terrible habit of going at him when he's already got dents in the perfectly placed emotional detachment that he wears like armor. She groans and puts her head in her hands. She shouldn't have pushed him that way.

She's not even sure she can blame him for lashing out at her; she already knows he's been acting like a wounded badger all week.

*Maybe he's right. Maybe I do like getting myself into trouble.*

---

---

Her nights haven't improved, in the strange dream department. In fact, they seem to be getting worse, leaving her feeling exhausted and drained come morning.

*The candles are lit, flickering ominously in the otherwise dark chamber. The shadows are thick, heavy with emotion.*

*She stands before him, her shame laid bare, his eyes crawling across her naked skin like a thousand spiders.*

*"I'll never love you," she hisses, her insides raw like a thousand wounds. The room is so cold and her nipples peak sharply. "No matter what you say. No matter what you claim."*

*"Your first mistake is that you think I need your love to get what I want from you," Aleksander utters smoothly, his hand cupping the back of her head, tangled in the thick strands of her hair. "Having you is enough. In time, your feelings might change. You and I are destined, tied by fate. I have forever and the years mean nothing."*

*"No amount of time can heal what you've done to me."*

*He's terrible and beautiful and she can't look away, even when she wants to. His lips taste like sin as they press against hers and when his fingers touch the collar he's placed on her neck, she feels worse than a slave.*

*She feels like a who-*

Alina gets out of bed and runs to the bathroom, dry heaving over the sink as she splashes herself with ice cold water.

The more she tries to forget the Darkling, the more he invades her dreams, crawling into her nights like a phantom that she can't escape.

---

---

They don't speak for an entire day after their argument. Or the next. Ivan even avoids having breakfast and dinner with her. The weight of the tension between them is terribly heavy and Alina can practically feel it sitting on her chest, like an elephant.

They avoid each other like a couple of panthers trapped in territory far too small. It's mentally and emotionally exhausting, so Alina tries to once again to stay out of the apartment for as long as possible. Sometimes he's there, sometimes he's not.

She volunteers her spare time at the orphanage, buying up a bunch of art supplies for the children to use with her. She finds that there's a typical lack of trust around strangers, a lot of reserve that she understands perfectly, but eventually many of the more artistically inclined children opt to spend some of their afternoons with her, learning how to draw their favorite animals.

It lightens her heart and eases some of the tension that she's been carrying along the lines of her spine these past few days.

Alina lies down in the grass, sketching out the charming street she lives on, drawing the bustling flower shop that stands below her apartment, outlining her bedroom balcony with

iron swirls and her lounge chair. For fun, she turns her neighbors into animals, and somehow Katja turns out looking like some sly cat with an arched back and really bad fur.

The neighbor to her left she makes out to be a rabbit, because the woman always looks about ready to bolt, always antsy on her feet.

“Are you the bear, Miss Lina?”

She laughs and sits up as one of the children flops down next to her, observing her drawing technique. “No, that’s my…roommate. Boyfriend, I guess.” That sounds so odd coming from her mouth.

The young girl’s face scrunches up. “You have a boyfriend? *Ew!* Aren’t you afraid of cooties?!”

“Oh, well if he has cooties, I most definitely already caught them from him.” The girl looks at her with wide eyes. Alina chuckles, adding a few more details to her picture.

“Why’s he look so grumpy?”

“Because that’s his natural state. We are having a tiff right now.” Huffing, Alina admits, “It’s making me sad.”

The little girl rests her head on Alina’s shoulder with a sigh. “Don’t be sad, Miss Lina. Maybe he’s sad too?”

*He’s a dick, is what he is,* Alina thinks to herself, because that’s a far cry from appropriate language to say in front of a child. “Maybe.”

Squirming on the grass, the redheaded girl claps her hands together excitedly, stained by the crayons she’d been drawing with. “You should bake him something. We bake for Matron Anya whenever she gets really cross with us and it always makes her happy again.”

There’s the small matter of Fedyor’s birthday being today…perhaps she’s onto something. It’s a good excuse to make some caramel fudge brownies; Alina has been craving them and she knows that Ivan steals them whenever she makes them.

Bastard won’t admit he likes them. Because he’s a salty ass.

“You, are a smart little girl,” Alina tells her, pressing a single finger to her freckled nose affectionately. “Maybe I’ll do that.”

The girl grins broadly, her two front teeth charmingly missing. “When are you coming back, Miss Lina? Can you teach us how to paint next time?” A few more children approach at the sound of that, looking at her with wide eyes. Puppy dog eyes, if Alina is not mistaken.

Sighing, because she can’t say no to such sweet faces, Alina agrees to teach them how to paint next time, even if she’s not really that great at it herself.

On her way home, she picks up some groceries, making sure to add in what she needs for the brownies. There are still a few hours left of daylight, so she'll hop to in the kitchen. Ivan was already gone before she left earlier, so she's mostly hoping he's still nowhere in sight.

Which…is so stupid. Nothing frustrates her more than this avoidance scheme they've fallen into.

Just as she's coming up to her front door, Miss Katja from the flower store bustles out of her storefront and pushes a medium size pot into Alina's arms. "Here, lovey. You look like you need a pick me up."

Alina juggles the weight of the pot that has been so suddenly shoved into her arms. "Ah… what's this then?"

"An orchid, you daft girl! Use those pretty little doe eyes of yours."

Alina rolls her eyes. "I know it's an orchid, but, *why*? You can't just give me free flowers, Miss Katja."

The older woman cackles in that rusty voice of hers, waving off Alina's concerns. "I can give you whatever I want. You look stressed. Take it home, it's a pretty one. I need more room on my shelves either way. You're doin' me a favor, girl. Now, off ye get. I saw that awful badger of yours slink by an hour ago."

Alina nearly groans in dismay. *Great*.

Feeling like she's walking to the gallows, Alina walks into her apartment, juggling everything, and walks upstairs to their second floor. She's vaguely impressed by what she sees; he must have cleaned while she was out of the house.

She places the lovely orchid on the window sill and scribbles Fedyor's name on the front of the pot. And, why not? She'll talk to the bloody plant if she's going to have it and it will be nice to pretend she's talking to Fedyor. Maybe she'll see if Katja has one of those mini succulent things, all spikey and silly. She could name one of those Mal.

Crazy Plant Woman Alina, at your service.

Ivan's door is shut, so Alina focuses on not getting herself worked up about him. He did clean, after all, so he must be feeling guilty about *something*. Besides, it isn't like she wants to be mad. It's not like she wants to feel contentious with him.

After the past few weeks, they've almost settled into something comfortable. Not to mention the…the other shift in their relationship. The *subtle* shift. The awareness that they've both been ignoring, the awareness that comes from being a man and a woman living alone together in tight quarters.

The day in the rain can't be forgotten, no matter how she's tried. Or the times they accidently brush against each other in passing, a flash of something zinging between them, near suffocating. A glance that lingers a little too long.

Alina feels like the more they ignore it, the more obvious it becomes.

*It doesn't mean anything*, is what she always tells herself. *It can't mean anything.*

So, pushing down her rampant thoughts, Alina goes about making the brownies, soon filling the apartment with the warm, chocolate scent of them. It's mouthwatering and she can't wait to pop them in her mouth.

But first, she should probably ask Ivan if…they want to light a candle or something and have a second of silence for Fedyor. Because neither of them are going to sing, that's for sure. Unable to stop the way her heart starts pounding anxiously, Alina knocks on his door and says as non-confrontationally as possible, "Ivan?"

After a moment, she hears him walking over to the door, pulling it open. His face is blank as he looks down at her before he gazes over her head, eyes catching on the deliciously warm brownies sitting on the table. "What?" His tone betrays nothing.

Saints, this is the first actual conversation they've had in over forty-eight hours and it's already terrifying.

Gesturing with her shoulder and body towards the brownies, Alina says neutrally, "I was going to light a candle since today is Fedyor's birthday. Want to blow it out for him?"

His dark eyes snap back to looking into hers and Alina feels her heartrate speed up embarrassingly. Gosh, she hopes she's not pissed him off worse.

"We're not singing."

Despite herself, Alina bites back a slight grin, the corners of her eyes crinkling in amusement. "Definitely didn't plan on it."

"Good. I wouldn't want to be subjected to that screeching you call a voice."

*Sulky rat bastard*. Grabbing him by his arm, Alina uses all her strength to drag him out of his room. "Maybe I'll sing now, just to spite you. Can't you just *behave*? I'm *trying* to be nice."

He allows her to pull him over to the table, where she lights a single candle in the largest, gooiest brownie that she can find. As the candle flickers, Alina sits down at the table off to the side and bows her head a bit with her eyes closed, briefly wishing Fedyor happy birthday in her mind.

When she opens her eyes, Ivan is still staring at the candle, lost in thought. His throat works, the only sign that he's feeling *something* about what's occurring. Not wanting to actually see any display of sensitive emotion from him, Alina looks away, as if that will give him privacy.

A few moments later, she hears him blow out the candle, hears him sit down heavily in one of the chairs. "You remembered," he says quietly, voice like sandpaper.

Alina looks at her fingernails, picking at one of them idly. "Of course, I did. I *do* pay attention to people other than myself. The first few years are always hard, for what it's worth.

I just…wanted to help."

"You didn't have to do this." He almost sounds a little shocked.

Picking up her brownie, Alina bites into it and shrugs. "I wanted to. I figured you had something on your mind this week, what with all the…problems we've been having. At least we're talking again, right? Positive outcomes."

There's a pause. Then- "You actually think this is because of him, don't you?" He sounds very tired and Alina is thrown off balance by the way that he suddenly won't look at her.

"Um…wait. What is because of what?" Her voice goes a little high, unsure of where he's going with this sudden shift in tone.

"You've always been so naïve." Ivan rubs his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You think I've been so awful to you this past week because of this particular day…and you went out of your way- *fuck*." He cuts himself off with that final curse word.

Alina stares at him in utter confusion. He sounds mad at himself and she's rarely heard him curse like that. "I mean…I just thought…" Is this not what he wanted?

"You think so little of me that you honestly believe I would be such an ass because of a single day that reminds me of him."

This conversation is getting more off-base by the second and Alina can barely keep up. "Is that…is that not why? I mean, I understand why today would be tough-"

Ivan's tone sharpens. "Are you so beaten down that you think it's acceptable for me to act like that towards you for an entire week?"

*Okay, pal. Back it up*. Alina doesn't know what to think of this, but she knows that she doesn't exactly like what's coming out of his mouth. An indignant tone creeps into her voice. "I was *trying* to be understanding, but now I'm not sure what the hell I was being understanding about! What the hell is going on? Is this your way of telling me you're ashamed of how you've been behaving? Yeah?"

He's still avoiding her gaze and now he's shifted with his elbow on the table, his temple resting on his palm, eyes closed tight. He's upset and now it's making her feel nervous, her heart fluttering out of control. She feels sick, because she's confused, he's not being clear and when communication isn't clear-

"Stop feeling that way, Alina." His voice is tight as he tries to not listen to her frantic emotions pounding in his head.

She stands up and paces. "I can't help it, you're upsetting me!" She steps towards him, because living in constant conflict like this doesn't feel good and now that she has no idea what's gotten him spun up this way, she feels completely lost. "Did *I do something* wrong?"

His jaw clenches and Alina makes a sad little noise without meaning to, because that most definitely means *yes*, doesn't it?

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then can you please tell me what is going on here? Because I am literally lost-in-a-cornfield-lost, Ivan. I got no clue.”

“The more I’m around you, the less I despise you,” he rasps. “And I don’t know how to deal with that.”

The words hit her harder than she anticipated. Whatever it is she thought he was going to say…it isn’t this. Yet, somehow, it fits. An emotionally repressed rock of a man, hiding from uncomfortable feelings that he doesn’t like? How otherworldly. *Not*.

It’s still a stunning realization. He’s talking about the day they got caught in the storm. He’s talking about the unspoken tension that’s been growing, the way his gaze -or hers- lingers for too long. He’s talking about what they *haven’t* been talking about. What Alina has been pretending isn’t there, in the shadows.

“If it makes you feel any better, I feel the same.” Alina whispers, because it’s true. She doesn’t hate him the way she once did. She doesn’t loathe him with every fiber of her being, even though she has *every right to*. “But I’m dealing with it. I know you can too.”

Carefully, very carefully, she comes to his side and crouches down, looking upwards at him. “Hey. *Hey*. Just because you don’t wanna string me up by my guts every second of every day doesn’t mean you love Fedyor any less. Am I lying to you?”

Finally, he meets her gaze and she feels her heart give a sad little flip, partially because she knows he’s listening and partially because the slight calm growing in his eyes is putting her at ease. “No. You’re not lying.”

Softly, Alina tilts her head and smiles up at him, trying to lighten a very heavy situation. “I thought I was the wreck in this house! You really wanted to drag this emotional baggage around all week like a sorry sack of potatoes?”

“I’m not really into being open about myself, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“*Mhm*. Fedyor mentioned that, once or twice. Said it drove him mad.” She grins. “Now, it’s driving me mad.”

He scoffs, the tense lines in his body starting to soften.

“Can we just be okay?” Alina asks him carefully. “Just because you don’t loathe me with every fiber of your being doesn’t mean you have to get yourself up in a tizzy. I don’t like fighting. I’m so tired of it. Besides, you know Fedyor would have loved for us to *actually get along*.”

Ivan sighs softly, gazing down at her. “I know. This is just…I don’t do well with change. And so much is changing.”

As they stare at each other, holding their gazes a little too long, long enough that Alina feels an interesting flip in her chest, she realizes he’s right. Things are changing; thing’s that

probably shouldn't change. Things neither of them want to change, but can't control and can't seem to stop.

He'd been attempting to distance himself from her, she realizes. He'd wanted the wall of detachment between them…and look how easily he let her tear it back down. Which probably isn't a good sign.

*We're in trouble and we only have ourselves to blame,* she thinks vaguely, forcing herself to look away from him. There's a fine line between being friendly and having an attachment. They've been stomping all over that line.

Going back to her seat, Alina pushes the platter of brownies towards him. "Eat. I know you're practically salivating."

He grabs one and pops it into his mouth whole. As he chews, he frowns, eyes catching on the orchid on the window sill. "Why do we have a plant named Fedyor?"

Alina covers her laugh with her hand.

Well. At least he's talking to her again.

---

---

Alina thinks it might be good to brush up on her hand-to-hand combat skills, as a result of that unfortunate attack on her person that one late night. "Do you think it would feel productive if we beat on each other every so often? Without our small sciences, of course." She really has no desire to go up against a heartrender anyway.

He's fixing their sink, the one that's been leaking. "Some days, I think so."

Alina pulls on her rough work boots and gestures towards the door with her head. "Come on. Let's go. I have the afternoon off. The sink will wait for you, I promise."

He glances up at her from where he's lying, brow furrowed. "You're suspiciously eager to get your face shoved into the dirt."

"That's why I'm asking you. Come on. You were always good in hand-to-hand combat. Teach me something. So, I'm not quite so '*helpless'*."

He makes a nasty, derisive sound at that. "You'll always be helpless, Starkov. Like a baby seal waiting to be clubbed."

She kicks at his feet. "Up, Ivan!"

He responds by yanking her feet out from underneath her, causing her to tumble with an embarrassing yelp. "That's your first lesson."

Blowing the hair out of her face, Alina sits up, rubbing her tailbone. Their legs are entangled and when she notices, she quickly brings her knees to her chest. “What lesson? I didn’t learn anything.”

Ivan snorts, as if to say, ‘why am I not surprised’.

*The gaslighting dick.*

~*~

Regardless of their earlier shenanigans, he follows her out to the forest, after they check with Katja to make sure she didn’t sense rain in her old joints.

He’s teaching Alina how to break out of a hold from either the front or the back.

“This is tough,” Alina mutters, her arms starting to feel wimpy and lax from trying to build the muscle memory of knocking Ivan’s grip from her shoulders or throat. He’s always been physically strong and she no match for him whatsoever, but at least she’s learning.

The logic behind the technique is sound and she’s glad she asked for his help, even if her skin occasionally heats when their hands touch, ever so briefly. Even if she feels too warm when his large hands maneuver her into position.

*Stop thinking that way before your heart gets all looney.*

Ivan laughs sharply. “If it were easy, everyone would be able to do it and no one would ever successfully get mugged ever again.”

Alina scoffs, wiping sweat off her brow as she takes a momentary break, sitting on a tree stump. “I’m not sure this would ever actually work on you.”

There’s that hint of a sneer that makes her feel all funny whenever she sees it. “That’s because I’d already have your heart in my grasp, Starkov.”

He’s right and it’s annoying. “You know, it always unnerved me being around heartrenders when I was in the First Army. Heck, even when I first came to the Little Palace. I just couldn’t get over the fact that you can kill someone just by looking at them…”

Ivan’s eyes seem to darken a little at her words.

“You’re saying that in past tense as if I still don’t scare you.” Ivan says it very matter-of-factly, but it strikes a chord between them.

Avoiding his gaze, suddenly unable to meet it for fear of what he might see in hers, Alina quietly says, “It’s hard for a part of me to not fear you. I think you know why.”

She’s seen him kill without pause over the many years. Without thought or question. Aleksander favored him not just because of his skill, but because of his *ruthlessness*.

He's watching her carefully; she can feel the burn of his stare on the side of her face. "Do you trust me?"

What sort of question is that?! "I…I mean, yes, but-"

The sudden sensation of there being a grip on her heart instantly makes her feel out of control and in danger. She looks up at him accusingly, shocked.

"I could kill you," he rasps lowly, eyes piercing straight through her soul. "Right now. Am I going to?"

She looks away, anxiety growing.

Alina trembles and her fingers nervously scratch over the place where her heart beats. He's not hurting her, but she can certainly feel his strength coiled around her like a boa constrictor. It feels restricting, like being tied up and gagged. All he would have to do is twist his hand and her heart would explode. Her nerves race. "Ivan…"

"Look at me."

Warily, she meets that dark hazel gaze again, noting the assortment of earthy colors there.

"Am I going to kill you?" He repeats the words softly, even as his grip on her heart lightly flexes, nearly making her jump out of her own skin.

Even if she called enough sunlight down to harm him, he'd still be able to kill her first. The sheer helplessness she feels is staggering and she *doesn't like it*.

"You aren't going to kill me," she says hoarsely, trying to convince herself. Besides, he's the one who is loyal to the Darkling and the last thing the Darkling wants is for Alina to die. "I trust my life with you." A lie; she trusts his loyalty to Aleks.

She waits for him to release his grip on her…but he doesn't.

Whatever he sees in her gaze, he's not impressed with. "What you feel isn't trust," Ivan tells her. "The way you feel about me is closer to that of a mouse, hoping the cat in the room isn't hungry."

Guilt washes through her. "You can feel that?" It isn't often that she feels that way, but every so often…when she's reminded of what he can do, what he has done, she feels that familiar flicker of unease. It's not that he would do it; it's that he *could*.

Of all the Grisha in the Little Palace, those with the red *kefta* embroidered in solemn black always gave Alina a shiver of unease.

"I won't lie and say that I don't enjoy making the *Otkazat'sya* fear me," Ivan admits without shame. His lip curls a bit, that attractive sneer pulling along the edge of his sharp canines. "I always have. Our power keeps us safe. But I don't want you to fear me the way they do."

Alina bites her lip and chews over his words. She tries to focus on the feeling of his hold on her heart and recognizes that it is nowhere near how it was that day she tried to goad him into killing her. It's a soft hold, gentle, just there and nothing else. Awareness.

It still feels like his hand is literally in her chest, which is slightly uncomfortable at the moment.

"I'm getting there," she tells him. "I've only known you a certain way for a long time, you know. I've only known one side of you."

"I know."

"I chose you to be the one to do it, you know. *That day*. Because I knew out of anyone, you would be able to end it," she says.

He looks pained, sickened even. Seeing this, Alina reaches out a hand and lightly touches his wrist. "For what it's worth, I think we have come a long way, haven't we? Isn't that progress?"

Ivan inhales and holds his breath before exhaling. "I suppose."

"Why can't you just admit I'm right?"

"Because you're usually not."

Alina scoffs and says under her breath, "Jerk."

Ivan graciously pretends he didn't hear that, instead he lunges at her with the intent of grabbing her, and Alina reacts the way he's been trying to drill into her brain for the past hour. With all the force she has, she attempts to knee him and push her palm upwards into his nose.

He lets go of her before any of this lands, pleased that she apparently absorbed something into her brain. "Better." His eyes hold a sliver of amusement in them. "For a helpless little girl."

Miraculously, she'd forgotten his grip on her heart through the whole thing, only remembering it was there when she felt it slowly easing away.

---

---

A very old, very unpleasant memory visits her that night.

*"You aren't blameless." Zoya tells her, the candlelight playing across her features. Lovely and piercing, something empty in her striking eyes. "It's your fault they died. Just as it's also* ***his****."*

*It's a cold knife, the feeling that slides through Alina's belly. "I'm sorry about your family. I'm sorry about all the families in Novokribirsk, you have to know this-"*

*"That's nice," the Squaller intones cruelly. "Too bad it won't bring them back."*

*"Why are you here? To remind me of what's been done in my name?" Alina feels ill, angry. Hateful. Tears are burning in her eyes, but she refuses to show weakness in front of the other woman. "What's been done with my power?"*

*The other young woman tilts her head back, an odd sort of expression shaping her lips. It's an ugly expression. "You know what I did. What I failed to do. I just wanted to make sure you knew what I thought of you, before the end. I hope this haunts you until the day you die."*

*The dream flickers, going back and forth between shadow and sepia.*

*Voice trembling, Alina replies, "Then you must know that I wished you had succeeded."*

*The poison and the knife…and Aleksander's livid face, a vision of wrath and ruin.*

*Zoya is pulling a bracelet off her wrist, fingers working with a certain bitterness. "No such luck for you, orphan girl. Aleksander is all yours now. Enjoy." She tosses the bracelet into Alina's lap.*

*"Why are you giving this to me? It's not like I can use it…"*

*"A souvenir. Where I'm going, I don't need it anymore. I'm sure you realize that."*

*The amplifier remains cold in Alina's hand and she stares at it in horror, watching the beautiful Grisha leave the room, her guards waiting for her just outside. Waiting to escort her back to the dungeon.*

*The last time she ever sees her, Alina is walking the halls with Fedyor. They have to step aside as a procession comes up from the far hall, Zoya in the center, flanked by the Darkling's official guards and two sets of heartrenders, including Ivan.*

*They all pass without a single glance, walking out the front door of the Little Palace.*

*Outside, the lonely execution block stands.*

~*~

When she wakes from the dream, a wave of sickness nearly pries its way out of her throat. Alina throws herself out of bed, away from the ghost that haunts her there. Getting to her knees on the hard floor, Alina opens up one of her storage chests, the one under her bed.

Even in the dark, she can feel the small little box inside of the cloth-filled chest.

In the small little chest sits Zoya's amplifier bracelet, made with tiger teeth. It's old by now, and yet it whispers with the sensation of the woman who once bore it. Wild and untamable, a fierce spirit full of vengeance and the will to act upon it.

Face scrunching up in pain, Alina presses the bracelet to her forehead and crushes down a horrifying wave of guilt.

She never liked Zoya. She never liked the way Zoya talked down to her and she never liked how the other woman chased after Mal with a certain glee. Regardless, Zoya was one of the few with the willpower to stand up to the Darkling and say no.

…and she paid for it with her life.

Even if Alina never put the knife or the poison in her hands, she feels responsible for her death, regardless. She was the weapon that was used to destroy Novokribirsk, where much of Zoya's family had perished.

It hurts. Her heart hurts enough that it feels hard to breathe. What's worse is the frustration that she'll never be able to sleep like a normal human ever again, that she's doomed to relive her failures over and over again, wondering how she can ever forgive herself, how she can fix the wrong that has been done.

*You'll never be strong enough. You're nothing. You're just a tool to be used. A slave.*

She cringes away from the voice in her head, not wanting to believe it. She wants to be stronger. She wants to be free of this misery once and for all, but how can she when the Darkling holds the keys to her power, at the end of it all?

How can one girl outwit an immortal man who always thinks five steps ahead?

Distantly, she realizes she's having a minor panic attack, her mind endlessly spinning around the idea of being trapped and being unable to redeem herself. That she'll die a monster. Her breathing goes sharp and shallow to the point where she starts getting dizzy and she can't focus.

For a moment, she fears that her heart is going to give out, the way it's pounding so hard and so terribly.

In the end, she shoves down her pride and Alina runs to Ivan's room.

Her voice is trembling violently when she knocks. "Ivan?"

"What is it?"

Opening the door, she walks inside, seeing his form on his bed, shirtless. She averts her eyes carefully, not wanting to be seen staring at him with any sort of interest.

His tone of voice makes her wince while she wrings her hands with her rampant nerves, because he doesn't exactly sound welcoming, but when does he? It's the middle of the night, how is he supposed to sound, ecstatic that she's graced him with her presence? "I, *uh*, I w-wanted to ask a f-favor." Oh great. Now, her voice is getting worse, showing her current mental state of despair and disorganization.

"…"

He doesn't make this easy, does he? Why does he never make her life easy?!

She spits it out quickly, stumbling over her words. "Can you please put me out? I'm exhausted and I've been having some really strange-"

"Alright." The sheets on his bed rustle as he moves to get out and Alina finds herself struck by how simple that was.

…no snide comment? No mocking her? She's racing through all the things that she thought would happen that she barely even notices when he's standing right in front of her already.

She feels him at her heels when she turns to go back to her room. She hears the sound of his distinct walk, as familiar to her as her face in the mirror. When they enter her bedroom, she feels herself getting anxious for another reason entirely, her face heating. It feels strange, to bring him into her private space like this.

No wonder he felt so miffed when he first caught her in his room, admiring Fedyor's things. There's boundaries between them, walls of sanity that they simply don't cross. She feels like she's bending all those unspoken rules tonight.

Standing beside her unmade bed, Alina looks up at him, even if it's hard to make out his features perfectly in the dark. "How do you want me to…"

Here, she can see the glint of his teeth, even the dark. He's smirking down at her and her stomach flips, because she likes that awful smirk and he's shirtless and she's probably going to hell for continuing to think of him like this-

"Unless you want to pass out on the ground, I suggest you get back in your bed."

"Right." Now, she feels stupid. Why is she shaking? Her nerves were already out of control before this, but now it's getting worse. Even better; he's probably *aware*. Oh, how humiliating! Alina settles herself back into her bed and waits for him, sitting upright like a board.

He makes a soft noise and says lowly, "Your pulse is fluttering like a hummingbird."

Alina looks away from his dark form and crosses her arms protectively across her chest. "Yes. Well. I'm nervous about being heartrended. But, also desperate to sleep, so-"

The bed dips as he joins her slowly. "We talked about this. There's no need to be nervous with me."

Those words coil low in her belly. He's too close for comfort and now Alina can't figure out if she's losing her mind over her lack of sleep or because he's here, *on her bed*, alone with her in her room.

In the middle of the night. Her mind is already racing back to that day in the forest, the way it felt pressed against him, the way *he felt*-

"Lie back," he orders softly.

Pulse throbbing, Alina takes a deep breath and slowly leans backwards until the back of her head rests on her pillow. When she's suitably settled, Ivan's hand reaches forward and wraps around her wrist. He's treating her with excruciating care and Alina wonders if she's already dreaming.

Without much of a warning, he plunges her down into the deep ocean of soundlessness, the mad pounding of her pulse going slow and soft. It's like being taken by a midnight tide, being dragged to the depths with only the light of the moon to bear witness.

Alina sighs dreamily, relaxing deep into her sheets, all her worries drifting away. It feels terrifying and wonderful at the same time, because at least this time, she was ready to feel the full force of his power crashing over her. It's *Ivan*.

"See," she says sleepily as her vision starts to melt away like a burning filmstrip. "I trust you…don't I?"

He swallows thickly, but doesn't reply. Instead, he shushes her, which causes her mind is going quiet, but even so, she's certain she feels his hand gently pass over her forehead. Her stomach clenches at that touch, imagined or not.

He pushes more power into her after that, likely having felt every single emotion passing through her. Which, would be embarrassing if she had any shame left, but it appears her tank is empty on that note, thanks to him.

She passes into a dreamless state, floating with no desire to return and it's heaven…

…until the ocean turns into the Fold, full of monsters and screaming voices. A cacophony of horror and Alina finds herself waking up, gasping for air, covered in sweat.

Disordered, she looks around, only to realize she's still in her bed, it's still hours before dawn, and Ivan is most definitely not in her room.

"What the hell…" she murmurs in confusion.

Why didn't it work like last time? Oddly enough, she feels *cheated*.

~*~

"You did it wrong last night," she tells him at breakfast, putting some French toast on his plate, accompanied by strawberries and whipped cream.

He looks up at her with his brow furrowed. "Excuse me? I don't do things *wrong*."

"Guess there's a first for everything, isn't there? It didn't work last night, Ivan." She sits down across from him so she can watch his face, even as she pours syrup over her own plate. Her resting bitch face feels strong today.

That sharp jawline clenches. "You were practically sucking your thumb when I was done with you. You were *out*. Like you asked."

It's irritating. She wants what she got that one night, months ago, when he gave her the best night of sleep she ever had. How does she get that again? She literally bent her pride and didn't get what she wanted. Which kind of burns. Needing to move, she stands up and lightly waters Plant Fedyor, whispering a sweet nothing to him.

She can practically feel Ivan rolling his eyes in her general direction.

Leaning her hip against the counter, Alina crosses her arms over her chest and scowls at him. "I woke up pretty fast from yet another freakish nightmare. I would say that's a fail. It only worked for so long."

He stares at her for a few moments, thinking something through. Then, without saying a word, he sips his coffee, eyes still on her face.

After a moment, he finally exhales. "Generally, putting someone to sleep only works for a short time for most heartrenders. If you got an hour or more out of me consider yourself lucky."

What. The. Hell.

"I don't want an hour, Ivan. I want the whole night."

He pretends to find the wall very interesting.

"Well? What did you do differently that first time?" Alina watches as a fascinating flush crawls up his neck. She makes a face of surprise, seeing this. Why is he flushing like that? "*What?!*"

"It may have been because I stayed in bed with you until morning that first time." He takes a long sip from his coffee again, not meeting her stare. "You curled up in my lap and clung on like a snail."

Now, it's Alina's turn to flush. "Well, you can't blame me!"

"I never said I was. I was just stating the difference. Do with that what you will."

Silence falls between them. A bird is beating a nut on their window, obnoxiously so.

Sliding down into her chair, Alina stares down at her rapidly cooling toast. She pokes at it, not sure where her head is at for the moment. "Well…that makes things…tricky."

That's an understatement.

"I guess I'll just…deal with the hour." She sounds like someone spat in her breakfast.

"I guess so," he replies shortly.

At least they're agreed, because having him spend an entire night with her would be *wildly* inappropriate.

And neither of them wants that. *Obviously*.

The bird keeps banging on their window and Alina gets up to shoo it away, feeling like she needs to go fly away herself. She sneaks another glance at Ivan and is surprised to find him looking at her again. The darkness in his gaze is making her throat go tight with emotion. There's a coil of hunger that unfurls from some dark shadow within her belly, filling her with a heat that she doesn't want to acknowledge. What's worse is the way his pupils seem to grow larger, as if he can sense that, too.

Which has got to be *impossible*.

Her legs feel shaky and she has to look away again, her face heating.

Neither of them wants this.

That's what she tells herself, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** comments and kudos are loved, as always! ♥ I definitely had some typos on the initial post, my edits should hopefully reflect soon enough XD Sorry about that.

Naturally, this keeps getting longer and the slow burn held for this chapter XD it almost didn't, but this chapter got too long so some things slipped off into the next one...oopsie!!! I swear, next chapter is the one when things actually change...and oooooh the Darkling is not going to be pleased with what I've written.

# Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They don't discuss it again, even if it hovers between them like a very bad joke.

At night, if she has a vivid nightmare that leaves her gasping for air, she'll go and ask him to help her back to sleep, which he does without complaint or question. It helps, but it isn't perfect and it's never enough, unfortunately. Alina isn't willing to ask for him to stay the night, feels too embarrassed by the very idea of it.

Clearly, he's opposed to the idea as well.

It's one thing for him to come into her room at night and manipulate her heartbeat and ease her back into slumber; it's another thing to ask him to stay in her bed until dawn breaks.

Another thing *entirely*.

---

---

A few weeks pass without issue. Life goes on as it does for those that live these 'normal' lives. Alina almost can't believe she's been fortunate enough to masquerade as *normal* for this long. Despite her unfortunate past, she's beginning to feel blessed by the time that she has to be herself again and find enjoyment in the small things.

Painting class with the children at the orphanage turns into a war of chasing each other with paint brushes for the day. The golden field fills with the sounds of delighted shrieks and high-pitched laughter. Alina has never been happier to have not worn anything she remotely cares about, because soon enough, the children *are chasing her* around.

"Wait," she yelps, even as she laughs. "I didn't say I was playing!"

The little boy behind her is running with his arm outstretched, trying to get her with his paintbrush, blue paint all wet on the end of the bristles. He giggles a little and when he finally catches her, he swipes the paint all up her arm.

Alina sighs and accepts that today is the day she's going to get messy. And…that's fine, she tells herself. It's *fine*. It's not like someone is going to shove her into a ball gown later and demand she look like some perfect Grisha princess to be paraded around.

No. She can just be herself in the here and now and not worry about what comes next. It's a nice feeling. *This is what normal feels like.*

"Got you! I got Miss Lina!" The boy cries out victoriously, waving his paintbrush in the air like a sword.

Just as he's celebrating his victory, the little redheaded girl, Paula, comes running at him and splashes him with bright pink, which he is most displeased with. Paula points at his face and laughs.

There is not much painting that actually happens during painting class, but the children have a blast regardless. By the end of the afternoon, Alina is exhausted, covered in paint, lying on her back on the grass as she stares up at the blue sky.

The children enjoy the waning sunlight, chattering away aimlessly, the way children do. Alina listens in, curious about what dwells on their minds. Wondering if it's anything she used to think about as a girl.

It turns out…they do think about things that used to bother her as a child, too.

"The Grisha will steal you away and eat you!" One of the boys says to Paula, making her face shift with terror. "They come and test you to see if you're good enough for stew."

Alina feels her heart tighten, but then she remembers that no one knows she's a Grisha. "Don't tell stories to scare her, Henrik. The Grisha don't eat children."

"How do you know?" The boy of nine asks suspiciously. His small hands are on his hips. "Have you met one?"

"She was probably tested once, you big idiot!" Someone shouts from a few feet away. "Which means she's met a Grisha."

"Yeah, but how do you know-"

"Cuz, she's *old*," the nasally voice replies with sarcasm.

Alina laughs, because yes, she's bloody *old*, it's time someone recognizes that.

Paula taps her on the shoulder. "Have you, Miss Lina? You've met a Grisha? Are they all terrible? Like they say?"

Alina examines her fingers, feeling her heart break a little. Aleksander only ever thought of gaining peace through ruling by fear. A terrible plan, in her opinion. The regular people of the world didn't feel any more warmly towards the Grisha now than they did years and years ago.

The Darkling had solved absolutely nothing, after all this time.

"I have, actually. Some are awful and scary." She tickles Paula and the girl shrieks. "Others are very nice people. They wouldn't even think of hurting you. Aside from during the test, of course. If you are hurting first, they won't test you. Keep that quiet though."

The children crowd around her closer, asking all sorts of questions about the Grisha and what is myth and what is actually real. It's exhausting, but Alina struggles through it until the sun begins to set in the sky.

“I have to go, it’s supper time for all of you. And, you’re all a mess! Matron Anya is never going to let me come back!” She tells them as two of the smaller children hang off her hands, digging their heels in, trying to get her to stay.

“*Stay, stay*,” they chant.

Alina groans and hangs her head backwards. “You are all impossible. I *can’t*. Grumpy Bear won’t be happy if I miss dinner.”

The tone changes immediately, the girls all oooing and aweing about Mr. Grumpy Bear. Alina rolls her eyes. “You would not be saying such things about him if you knew him. I’ll see you all next week. Go, get cleaned up before Matron Anya *sees you*!”

The children laugh and run inside, still teasing Alina about her *boyfriend* and all the cooties he’s given her. It’s funny, in a way, so Alina finds herself chuckling about it on her way back to the apartment.

~*~

When she gets home, the apartment is filled with the scent of some sort of delicious roast and Alina’s mouth waters. If she’s taught him anything, it’s how to cook decently well.

Ivan’s gaze travels up and down her body from where he stands at the kitchen counter. “Dare I ask what this disgrace is?” The disdain in his tone is so thick she can feel it in her bones.

Alina looks downward and sees the various splashes of color all over her clothes. She’s got old Ravkan war paint on her face, if she’s not mistaken. She got a few odd glances on her way through town. “Oh. The children…were playing a game.”

“…”

“I didn’t mean to get involved, but they are quite persuasive,” she says, shyly rubbing at her face. The way he’s looking at her has her feeling self-conscious.

“Well. Clean up. I’m not serving some pagan woman child,” he says dryly, eyes still traveling over her form.

Alina flushes, eyes narrowing at him over that slight. If he that’s what he’s thinking, he can keep *watching*. She turns her back on him and stomps towards the bathroom, but as she does, she lifts her shirt off over her head and tosses it off in some indiscriminate direction, leaving her in her brassiere.

“Starkov…” he says warningly, eyes burning into her bare spine.

“Being a painted pagan requires more nudity, Ivan.” She says it over her shoulder with a sarcastic grin. “Don’t worry, I know how to clean up.”

She doesn’t glance at the expression on his face as she closes the bathroom door behind her, but a part of her wishes she had.

~*~

The roast turns out quite fabulous and Alina is still astounded that he cooked something so well. Despite her telling him how good it was, he still looks a bit lost in his thoughts. Seeing as she's become more accustomed to bickering with him, his complete silence makes her uneasy.

She likes to fill silence with chatter, it makes her feel better. She also realizes that it's a habit that probably annoys him.

Nudging her foot against his under the table, Alina presses, "What are you so serious about right now? Still impressed by the free show I gave you, huh?"

He snorts, eyes fluttering with a subtle eye roll. "There wasn't much to see."

It's hard not to be offended by that, but Alina keeps that off her expression. "I'll try harder next time, then."

"I'd prefer that you don't."

"I get it; I'm probably a bit much to handle. Too much estrogen, probably weirds you out."

He's giving her a very flat, serious look. "Or maybe you're playing with fire, ever thought of that?"

Alina pops a rosemary potato in her mouth and chews thoughtfully. "I'm an Inferni, now? How did I miss that? My life would have been *much* easier."

Ivan's stare doesn't flicker, the only sign that he's not joking nor is he open to her making jokes about their situation.

Vaguely, she realizes that talk like this probably isn't healthy for their sanity whatsoever. It's crossing the line of fun bickering and winding down into something closer to dangerous flirtation.

Which, being the Darkling's most trusted man, is what he's not-so-subtly warning her of.

~*~

It turns into one of those nights where it feels like a line of string is hooked between the two of them, tight and far too taut. Ready to break; and it's likely Alina's fault, what with her earlier stripping antics. There's something in the air and she decides to not try her luck asking him to heartrend her. The idea of having him the darkness and shadow of her bedroom has her feeling like she needs to run around under the stars, just to unwind the coil of *something* building inside of her.

*You know,* Zoya's femme fatale voice says in her head, *there are **ways** of fixing that.*

*Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's what I'm avoiding. What **we're** avoiding,* Alina thinks sourly, arms crossed as she stares upwards at the ceiling, moonlight dancing across her room

peacefully. *Besides, I'm a mental wreck and he's an emotionally repressed piece of furniture that I like to look at occasionally.*

Zoya's scoffing, waving it away. *He's a man, and things work even if they're sad. So?*

*So, it's not getting a huzzah from me, if that's what you're asking*, Alina thinks scathingly.

*Well, seeing as I'm a figment of your imagination,* Zoya's sly tone says, *technically you're asking yourself, Sun Summoner*.

She's got a point, this awful ghost in Alina's brain. Zoya never did shy away from anything. Not only that, she wasn't exactly a prude either. In fact, she got around, didn't she? Alina rolls her eyes, huffing in memory. It still feels like a cheese grater against her nerves whenever she thinks of Zoya and Mal. She makes a gagging noise.

Tossing and turning for an hour or so, Alina's exhausted body eventually falls into rest and it seems that for once, she's blessed with a dream that isn't altogether awful.

*She feels safe. Loved and protected. It feels strange, to feel this way. The warmth in her chest, instead of a hollow emptiness.*

*"There's a sight I haven't seen in a while," Mal's voice echoes close to her ear.*

*Sunlight pours over her, near blinding as she tries to see over her shoulder. "What? What sight?" She wants to see* ***him****, but the dream is too fuzzy.*

*"You looking happy again. It's been a long time."*

*"I shouldn't be." She tries to focus on the forest in the distance, but everything is blurred. "There's so much wrong I need to undo." Guilt washes through her; how can she just be happy with this temporary 'normalcy', all while knowing what's awaiting her in the Little Palace?*

*She's been complacent and suddenly, it sickens her like a poison. The dream flickers, nearly going dark with her fraught emotion.*

*Mal tightens his arms around her and she leans into this phantom in her mind. She wonders if she even truly remembers what it felt like to be in his arms or if her subconscious is simply pulling from her recent experience with Ivan.*

*"Why do you think you don't deserve happiness, Alina?" Mal's voice is calm.*

*"Because. I'm a terrible person."*

*He laughs and laughs, the sound ringing from some very old memory, deep within her mind. "In what world are you a terrible person? Terrible things have happened* ***to you****…there's a difference. You're the one who gave her all just to be by my side, even in the days that I didn't give you my all. Your heart is too big. Stop feeling like you're committing a crime for feeling happy and moving forward."*

*The question is how to move forward. How break the cycle of war, to stop it from continuing forever and ever…*

*The shadows are growing at the edges of the dream, an ill-omen waiting in the wings.*

*"He's going to collect me again, Mal." Her voice wavers with resignation. "Aleksander isn't ever going to give me a true choice in all this. All he's done is lengthened the leash he walks me on." Her fingers touch Morozova's collar, feeling the smoothness of antler.*

*"Then, you need to break his hold. You need to stop living in the past- you deserve a future that's yours."*

*Mal's lips touch the back of her head and she closes her eyes.*

When she wakes, for once she doesn't feel awful and ill.

Instead, she finds herself wishing she had taken the old books from the Little Palace, detailing out the different amplifiers. If she had somewhere to start, perhaps she could start piecing together how to take her power back for herself, to fix all the wrong that Aleksander has visited upon not just her, but the world.

He probably locked all those books away. He probably locked anything away that she could use to set herself free of him. He never wanted her for an equal; he never would have allowed any chance that she could walk away from him.

---

---

"I'll be home somewhat late," Alina tells Ivan as she prepares for the day, lacing up her boots. When she stands up, she looks at herself in the mirror, adjusting her dark shirt and blue scarf tastefully. "Try not to wait up for me." She says *try*, because telling him *not to* is pointless. He's going to listen out for her regardless of what she says.

So why say anything at all, actually? He can be like arguing with a wall, if he puts his mind to it.

It looks like he's preparing to leave for the day as well. She's never quite pinpointed what he gets up to, but for the most part he hikes and jogs, anything to keep fit. Anything to keep his restless soldier spirit cool. If he ever gets truly bored, he's done contracted project management on the Southern side of town where there's a large expansion occurring. He's good at bossing people around and keeping them on schedule, so it fits.

"…remember what happened last time you were out late alone?" His voice is oddly neutral, like he's trying to hide a very specific feeling. It's times like this that Alina finds it unfair that he can read her like a book, but she has no clue what goes on in his head.

There's a flutter of anxiety growing about her now, not because of the reminder -*his way of trying to scare her into staying in, she sees it for what it is*- but because of what she's going to say next. "I'm not going to be out alone; I'll be right up the street at the pub."

A very uncomfortable silence stretches between them. She meets his eyes in the mirror, dark and unreadable. Her heart starts up with her nerves and she swallows. Even if she outwardly looks confident in herself, he can always see *inside*.

Finally, he ends her misery and asks, "With?"

Aha. The magic question. "Viktor from work invited me with a group of friends. It's his twenty-fourth birthday and they're celebrating."

"Is that so." His voice is emotionless, but his face says how he feels about that.

Straightening her shoulders a bit, because she has no intention of *not going*, Alina says, "It'll be perfectly safe. I'll be just up the road, in plain view of the apartment. No harm in it at all, just some fun. You won't even realize I'm gone." She feels absolutely absurd trying to soothe him over this, because it's her life, it's not like he can stop her-

Well, he *could* stop her. But that would kill any sort of balance and trust between them, so it's really on him to make that choice.

He's not saying anything again, likely chewing over his options. Alina fidgets with her hair as he watches her and she can't help adding more to the conversation. "I really just want to do something I would have done at that age…I miss it. Something stupid and meaningless."

The way his eyes continue to blacken has her wondering if the proximity of her absence isn't the problem. Which makes her wonder what the problem *actually is*.

"Getting drunk in a pub with a bunch of children isn't going to replace what you think you missed out on. They aren't your age. They aren't like you," he says coldly. "Not even close." Ivan brushes past her on his way out, his boots stomping down the stairs as he exits out the front door.

He literally *walks out* on their conversation and Alina stares after him, her mouth open just a little. *What the hell just happened?*

~*~

Regardless of the unpleasant reaction Ivan had to her news, Alina still walks to the pub after work with Viktor, where they meet up with a group of young women and men, already set up with pitchers of ale and *kvas*.

He introduces her around and they're all a welcoming group. It's fun, for what it's worth, but she does find herself critically observing, even through the light tipsy feeling she gets from drinking while they play card games and the like. It does slightly seem like watching a very inexperienced group of adults for a striking moment and it horrifies her, very briefly.

*Just enjoy it for what it is*, she tells herself as she laughs at yet another clumsy attempt made by one of Viktor's friends to pick her up.

She's been fending the amorous young man off all night with his ridiculous pick-up lines and she's relieved when Viktor finally comes to the rescue and tells him, "Man, you gotta stop that. Her boyfriend is literally up the street and he *will end you*. I thought I was going to die the first time I met him."

The young man groans in dismay, his eyes red with alcohol. "*Ugh*. I thought she was playing hard to get when she said she wasn't single."

"You're welcome to keep it up and find out, bro." Viktor says with laugh. "But, I wouldn't recommend that. *At all*. You might end up as a new centerpiece above the bar."

The drunk pales hilariously. "*Shit*."

The party goes back to relative normality after that, with Alina completely unscathed for the rest of the evening. Thankfully. She can only handle so much heavy-handed come on's for one night.

"Thanks for the invite," Alina tells Viktor later before she leaves. She kisses him on the cheek and says, "Happy Birthday."

When she gets home, she slips in as quietly as possible, trying not to stumble into anything on her way to her bedroom. She sneaks past Ivan's door, as if avoiding the boogeyman.

---

---

It's been a few days and he's still out of sorts, which Alina is beginning to find hard to ignore. The air between them always seems like a line of gasoline, ready to be set off by a single lit match falling into it. They're talking, but it's never a pleasant experience -more like sitting carefully on a bed of nails.

She's currently *trying* to ignore him as she focuses solely on her small science, feeling the ebb and flow of her power straining thinly inside of her. Any time she tries to call more, it feels choked, as if artificially held back. Like an ocean only able to filter through a thin straw.

*Frustrating*.

"Can't you do any more of that?" His voice is dry, unimpressed as always. "You've been practicing for months."

Oh, yes. And then there's *Ivan*. Ever the voice of positive reinforcement. Alina rolls her eyes.

It's ridiculously hard to do anything in front of the man. He's got more power in his pinky than Alina does at this point and it's slightly humiliating. She can imagine him thinking, 'this

is what the Darkling chose? This worthless girl with only moderate skill and no desire to use her own power? Pathetic.'

*Ugh*. Gag. He's been thinking that for decades.

Alina sighs and the three balls of sunlight that she's been playing with dissipate with a crackle. Frustration washes through her. Every time she tries to expand the sunlight into a large dome of power, she fails. It's like hitting a wall, repeatedly, no matter how hard she pushes to do it. "I can't."

He's doing pull-ups on one of the tree boughs and Alina is impressed that he can even speak while doing it. She can't even complete a single pull-up and the time he tried to make her do it was rather trying indeed. He's the master of disdainful expressions and he knows how to make her feel utterly useless with a single glance.

"I don't think you're trying. I've seen you encase an entire skiff with sunlight, *multiple times*."

She tries to not watch the flex of his arms as he pulls his chin upward. Definitely ignoring him. "Yeah, well, here's your newsflash; that wasn't me. It was Aleksander pushing it through me."

"It's still your power," he grits out. "You can use it. You're blocking yourself."

Irritated, Alina pulls her light scarf down harshly, baring her collarbone. "I wear a collar that says otherwise. I'm his to *use*. His intent to enslave me forever has been made pretty clear."

He drops from the branch, boots landing loudly on the ground. Ivan cracks his neck both ways as he snidely replies, "Slave is a strong term for what you are; a trophy is more apt. I imagine in your delusion, you'd call yourself his whore too."

Shooting him the most disgusted look that she knows how to produce, Alina says, "Whores get paid, Ivan. What I do with him is of my own design and nothing more."

He emits a nasty laugh. "Whatever you want to call it."

What is up with him? Screw that, she doesn't care, but she's going to make it known she's not going to take it quietly anymore.

Alina stands up sharply and comes at Ivan, pushing at his chest, trying to make him step back a few paces, looking to assert some dominance of her own. He snorts at her attempts, which makes her even more ticked off at him. She steps on one of his boots and pushes hard enough to finally knock him back a bit. She can be pleased with small victories. "I think you need to mind your own damn business. What I do in bed isn't your concern *whatsoever*."

Strong hands wrap around her wrists as she goes to shove him again and he holds tight as she snarls up at him. Ivan seems unconcerned, dark eyes flickering with something unreadable. "Must be why you keep asking me to stay the night with you. It's all becoming *clear*, Starkov."

That is the lowest blow she's ever seen him go for and she feels damn well insulted! Teeth gritted tightly, Alina hisses, "If I needed someone to warm my bed for those purposes, I'd find another option. Don't worry, you're safe from this whore."

His jawline flexes sharply at that, eyes narrowed. He drops his grip on her wrists. Alina furiously stumbles away. He calls after her, but she snaps back, "I've had enough abuse from you for one day. I'm going home."

"You're not done practicing," he says in response.

"*Oho*," Alina laughs caustically over her shoulder, way too emotional for this engagement. "The hell I'm not! I've had it up to *here* with you, sir." She makes a cutting gesture with the palm of her hand, to demonstrate exactly where, height-wise, she's had enough of him.

Ivan leans his shoulder against one of the trees, tilting his head back, as if he can look down at her from across the distance between them. He can, *actually*, he's rather good at that. He's very good at making her feel like a disappointment, with a single glance.

His voice sounds out again, purposely neutral. "If you're going home to be useless, do you want me to pick up something from the butcher on my way home? For dinner? Or are you staying out *again*?"

She gapes at him. The *snake*. Completely awful one moment, then playing the wronged victim the next. Alina exhales *very* slowly, because she's actually considering throwing a ball of sunlight at his face. "Yes, that would be lovely," Alina says as demurely as she can manage. She wants to kick him in the shin, very much.

There's the corner of his mouth, twitching. He's laughing at her, the wicked bastard. "Anything else?"

"Rubbers, Ivan." She deadpans, because she's flaming mad at him. "In case I take advantage of your innocence with my whorish ways. Tonight feels like the night."

Somehow, he doesn't even bat an eye. He's looking at her like she's the most stupid creature he's ever had the displeasure of knowing. "A skilled heartrender doesn't need to use such things, in case you didn't know."

Is he making fun of her? He *must* be joking. Has to be. How did he turn that around so easily? "Saints, aren't you *just so* bloody useful? *That's not the point*!" She's going to murder him. Spinning on her heel, she stomps off towards town, nearly falling into a thorny bush with a yell of surprise.

His nasty chuckle makes her ears burn.

~*~

He doesn't come home until a few hours later, which is fine, because Alina has had some time to stew over their current state of emotional drama.

She helps him prepare dinner, finally coming to a conclusion. “You really are a controlling ass, aren’t you?”

His dark eyes flicker over her irritably. His side brushes hers as he leans over to grab another knife for the chicken. “That’s a bit out of left field.”

“It’s really not.” Alina tosses the slim cut carrots into the pot and grabs the onions, beginning to peel them. Great, she’s going to be crying soon, isn’t she? Ivan’s going to be *thrilled*. “I’ve been thinking about it all afternoon-”

The corner of his mouth curls, like a wolf’s. How that sneer always draws her in even when just the sight of it pisses her off, Alina will never understand. “Have you now? *All* afternoon? No wonder you’re so productive.” His sarcasm is so heavy she can almost taste it.

“Keep that big ego of yours contained before you choke me with it,” Alina scoffs. *Don’t rub your eyes,* she tells herself, feeling the potency of the onion creeping upward already. “I know I’m right. It’s what’s been bothering you these past few days. *Control*.”

He makes a noise of exaggeration, slicing through the chicken, his shoulders tensing up like a dog with its hackles raised. That’s when she knows she’s onto something.

This is dangerous territory she’s treading on, but she’s also certain he’s at the point where he can handle it. “You were *just* like *this* with Fedyor. Any time he wasn’t glued to your side, you had your hawk eyes digging into his spine, as if you could compel him back under your thumb. And you and I *both* know what a social butterfly he was.”

He’s suspiciously quiet, but she can hear his teeth grinding.

“We’ve been fine for a couple weeks now, you and I,” Alina continues, ignoring him and his subtle display of displeasure. “…until a few days ago when I decided to go out and *socialize*. With other people. In a *pub*-”

“You’re imagining things.”

“Don’t even trying gaslighting me; I’ve been with the King of Gaslighting for nearly fifty years.” Alina feels her eyes beginning to sting from the onion and she averts her face from it. “Just own up to this little personality trait of yours. You are a jealous, possessive sort of *ass* and you never liked sharing Fedyor’s attention with *anyone*. Now, for whatever reason, you’re projecting that onto me.”

“I am *not*-” There’s that red creeping up the back of his neck, a sure sign that he’s flustered about something.

Oh, this onion is *killing* her. Her eyes are seriously watering now and she closes her eyes hard, trying to alleviate the sting and focus at the same time.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist about it,” Alina says matter-of-factly. “Let’s just acknowledge it and move on, so we can stop getting whiplash from these stupid fights. I get it, I really do. We’ve been living together for nearly two years and a part of you probably

feels a little…tightfisted about me. I don't *care* about that, Ivan. You're the one who says trust is *a thing*, so we need to be more open about this kind of stuff- *ouch*!"

She cuts her finger on accident while blinking her stinging eyes. The momentary absence of pain is followed by the sharp slicing sensation, making her hand light up with sudden pain. Not wanting to look at the damage, but needing to, Alina looks at her finger, seeing the blood welling up from the large slice. Soon, it streams down her hand like a river of crimson.

Ivan washes his hands after putting the chicken in the pot and then grabs hers, dragging her over to the sink wordlessly. He puts her bleeding finger under the spray and the blood slowly washes away along with any bacteria, the cold water soothing it.

He's not said a darn word in rebuttal to what she said, so Alina purses her lips tightly together to try and keep from smirking. As Ivan dries her hand on a towel, his dark eyes catch the expression on her face and he says, "Stop looking so pleased with yourself, klutz."

As he's speaking, Alina feels a strange knitting sensation on her finger, realizing that he's closing the cut. "I didn't think you could do things like that."

"Major puncture wounds and slices, I can't do. A small cut like this is nothing for me," he drawls, arrogant to a fault. "Many heartrenders aren't capable of any healing whatsoever-"

"Thank you," she says genuinely, looking up at him.

He stills, catching her gaze. His breathing shifts slightly and then he looks away sharply before he can reveal anything of meaning to her. "Don't make a big deal out of it. You're absurd."

Finishing the onion for her, Ivan puts the lid on the pot while she sits in one of the kitchen chairs, watching him expectantly. When he realizes that, he freezes, doing a double take of her. "You aren't actually expecting me to dignify what you said with a response, are you?"

"Oh, I do." Alina folds her hands neatly in her lap, looking at him *very* sweetly. "Unless you want to drag out our standoff for another few weeks until you're ready. I know how it thrills you to carry around your unpleasant feelings for days on end and I'll wait it out if you prefer."

Ivan immediately pinches the bridge of his nose, teeth gritted hard. "You are relentless."

"I can be. What will it be? Are we airing our dirty laundry today or like, in two weeks? I just would like to know, so I can adequately prepare myself and mark my calendar."

"You're far worse than Fedyor."

"That's probably because I'm not as nice as him," she drawls. "He tolerated a lot of bullshit from you; I do as well, but *I have limits*."

Dropping his hand to his side, Ivan inhales sharply, nose flaring as he stares at the clock on the wall. Finally, he exhales hard in resignation. "Fine. *Sure*. It bothered me."

It's like squeezing blood from a rock with this man and it makes Alina want to scream incoherently. Instead, she remains as calm as humanely possible. "What bothered you?"

If he were a dog, his hackles would be raised. "It's nothing personal-"

Alina snorts. "It must be if you've been brooding like this for days."

"I didn't like it when you went out." His jawline goes tight, muscles flexing. "And *yes*, it's about control. You are my responsibility and I don't like when you aren't where I want you at all times."

Well, then.

Clapping delicately, Alina says, "Well done. You didn't even die while saying it. I don't agree with this particular…*concern*…of yours, but we can work with it."

He looks uncomfortable, expression still stern, strong shoulders tense under his shirt. "That's it? No childish tantrum from you over how overbearing and unreasonable I am?"

Gesturing with both palms up, as if to say, 'what's the point in that', Alina says, "That's it. I already know you're overbearing and unreasonable. Now, we can move on." She points to the pot. "That's done in, what, an hour? See you then."

She gets up and heads to her room; she has things to read, after all.

He watches her go, his brow furrowed.

~*~

It's one in the morning when an 'unpleasant' dream of Aleksander wakes her once more. The feel of his hands gliding down her arms, his breath in her ear, echoing in her mind. The possessive, sure way that he touches her, his palm on the collar he forced upon her. The way her body heats under his touch; the way it makes her hate herself for enjoying it. The way she wakes up, sweating, moist between her thighs.

Feeling heavy with disgust and self-hatred, she knocks on Ivan's door, draped in her robe, hair a bit wild from tossing and turning.

"Ivan."

No response.

She adopts a louder tone, blood pressure rising. "*Ivan*."

"Stop *whining*. What do you want?"

"I want you to tuck me into bed. *Seriously*. What do you think?"

He sighs with ill-temper, but his door opens up moments later and he follows her into her room.

She's getting accustomed to his presence in her room at night, her nerves becoming less rampant each and every time. There's still a flicker of fear when she feels his immense power crawling under her skin, but now she more so hates how oddly intimate the whole process is beginning to feel. That's probably what sets her on edge *more*.

Being so used to him now, Alina is certain that she would recognize the feel of him, compared to another heartrender. There's something about how it feels when it's Ivan, something *unmistakable*. If she were blindfolded and had to submit to ten different heartrenders fiddling with the flow of her blood, she would *know him*, without even seeing him.

There's something to be said for putting yourself completely in the care of someone who can easily kill you with a twitch of his fingers. Something dangerously vulnerable. The rawness of the situation is only made more apparent by the way she is soothed by the scent of him when he sits down beside her, the terrifying way that she no longer minds that her sheets often carry ghostly hints of him by dawn, even though he's not next to her.

Alina can't help but wonder if he's feeling as unbalanced as she is. She wonders what he feels when he's dipping under her skin, if she's as familiar to him as he is to her. In fact, she wonders if this is contributing to his certain possessive feelings; does she feel like his possession, because her veins are his to ride without restraint when she asks him to her room?

Does he secretly like it? Does her moment of vulnerability give him a hint of superiority or is there something more to it? His arrogance and his ego could choke a whale and yet he never holds this over her in the daylight. In fact; he *usually* avoids conversation around it.

He never refuses her either. It's not like she asks him to help every night, far from it, but regardless, something is hovering in the air between them, more each time. She's noticed a hint of reluctance with him, as if he doesn't think he should be doing it anymore, but she can't quite pinpoint the reason for it.

Sometimes, he scoots out so quickly that she wakes up only thirty minutes later, disgruntled.

It leaves Alina wondering what he's so afraid of, because the only thing that -*probably*- scares him is *emotions*.

---

---

The weeks pass by in a blur. Summer is coming on strong, the air starting to heat more and more each day. They have to be careful with their outdoor practices in the warmer months, because the forest can often become a playground for teenagers looking to escape their homes for an afternoon or two.

Alina's been able to push more light out, bit by bit these days. It doesn't reek of guilt and horror the way it has forever. At least she doesn't hate using it quite so much anymore. Dissipating the large ball of sunlight, Alina looks over to where Ivan is doing pushups. "Hey.

Do you want to try some hand to hand? Before I get rusty again." Not that she was ever good at it to begin with.

Ivan switches to one-armed pushups, not-so-subtly showing off. His voice is tight with effort as he says, "I'm not sure you and I have the same notion of what hand to hand combat is. Clawing with your fingernails-"

"I've only done that to you when you deserved it! And usually, I was overwrought with emotion."

He finishes his set and stands up, wiping sweat from his brow. "Excuses." He cracks his neck idly, working his jaw for a second before coming closer to her, taking on a strong stance that she recognizes from him. "But, fine. Come at me."

It's embarrassing how she always forgets how strong he is. How easy it is for him to lift her off her feet and swing her over onto her ass. *Repeatedly*.

She gets a few good moves in, catching her leg around behind his once or twice, using his large amount of momentum to toss him into the dirt.

He yanks her down expectedly and she shrieks when Ivan wraps an arm around her waist, pinning her on her back, claiming her wrists above her head. She tries bucking him off, but he's a bit too heavy for that to actually work. He locks his legs on her sides, effectively stopping her side-to-side thrashing. "Well. Break out of this, Sun Summoner."

Alina groans in frustration and goes limp underneath him. She's not thinking about the weight of his body or how he feels over her.

His eyebrow rises up, victory in his gaze. He smirks down at her like a shark. "Giving up so quickly? *Shocking*."

She headbutts him and he snaps back from her, hand clutching his forehead as he groans. With one large effort, Alina inefficiently manages to buck his ass off of her while he's distracted, throwing herself on him, her knees on his shoulders, one hand on his throat, the other poised to punch in his nose. "You let your guard down," she says as she pants with exertion, meeting his heated eyes.

That's when she realizes she's kind of straddling his chest, the way she's got her knees on his shoulders, making her falter for one hot second, because *oh*-

Her muscles go lax on her against her will and she realizes his hands have likely come together behind her back. He sits up and she slides down into his lap with a yelp, his heartrending having made her go useless. His hold leaves her immediately after and Alina rolls away from him, growling under her breath, "You just couldn't let me win, could you?"

"Why would I do that? Your enemies never will."

Alina stands up when he does, feeling shaky from the sparring. It's tough, fighting man much taller and stronger than her, but good exercise. "My enemies aren't usually a bunch of

heartrenders, you great big cheater."

He's smirking again, pleased with himself- and Alina simultaneously hates and likes how he looks while doing it. Stupid, brutish, awful man…

They head home for the afternoon, stopping at one of the coves along the way. Ivan kneels down by it and splashes a handful of water over his face, cleaning away any dirt and sweat. Alina watches a few droplets run through the well-manicured scruff along his jawline before dipping down to the hollow of his throat.

For a moment, Alina's mind goes a little dumb, watching that water travel down his skin. She wants to reach out and wipe it away and she can't look away from his-

Unexpectedly, Alina feels a flash of heat, low in her belly. A tight clench of something she's been trying to deny for weeks and it's something that Alina hasn't felt for someone in a long time. It almost feels like being thirsty in the desert, seeing a cold glass of water, just out of reach, longing for it with all her being-

It terrifies Alina, the way the feeling blossoms inside of her. Blooming, like a flower. One small little image and she's already betraying herself. She crosses her legs tightly where she's sitting on a tree stump and pretends everything is *fine*. She pretends that her belly isn't liquid hot and that the place between her thighs doesn't feel heated.

Unfortunately, it seems, everything is *not* fine.

Ivan's head whips in her direction, like a wolf scenting prey in the distance. He focuses on her, his pupils wide and yawning with darkness. She's never seen him look like that before and for a moment, her heart seems to stutter with her mixed nerves. He almost looks *hungry*.

"What's wrong…?" Alina whispers, looking left and right, even behind her shoulder -*like an idiot*- not thinking that it's about *her*.

His throat works and his eyes look downward where her legs are crossed for a split second. "You're-" Ivan's mouth snaps shut and his jaw clenches visibly. He looks reluctant to speak. He averts his face sharply, hands clenching. "Nothing. It's nothing."

What is he talking about? What is he…*oh*. Oh Saints, *no*!

Alina's mouth drops open and she turns red as a tomato. Did he just follow the flow of her blood and figure out *where it went*?! "Ivan! *Unacceptable*!" She stomps off into the brush in complete mortification, because literally it was just a single flash of interest, of stupid dumb animal arousal, and he caught a whiff of it so damn easily.

How is she ever going to look at him in the face again? It's one thing to tease the man, it's one thing to toe the line of flirtation, but oh hells, actually reacting to him is on a whole other level of *wrong*. It doesn't matter that he has also had reactions to her that one day in the rain, but *he's a man*, all he needs is a strong wind and he's ready to go.

Alina has no excuse, because a strong wind doesn't work on her libido.

The whole way home she finds herself panicking like a schoolgirl, but this is worse than any schoolgirl problem. She leaves him behind, not concerned whatsoever, because it's obvious how tightly he keeps an eye on her with his heartrending. Alina is nearly *convinced* that he doesn't realize he's doing it half the time; after all these years of being her elite guard, it's now second nature to him.

Locking herself in the bathroom, she rips off her sweaty clothes and fills the tub, feeling like her world has gone completely off the rails.

It isn't because she feels like her attraction is a betrayal of Mal or his memory; not at all. She'd been sharing Aleksander's bed long before Mal was even executed. Their love transcended far beyond something as base as physical lust. Mal was her heart and soul, a symbol of her freedom, her innocent childhood. Aleksander…well…he was all dark desire and being owned, of filling holes in her heart with sexual need, even if it never made her *happy*.

Settling into the water as it becomes lukewarm, Alina slides underneath the surface, holding her breath, seeking the numb silence below the water. Floating, she tries to sort herself out. She's terrified, she realizes, terrified because Ivan's never been on her side, never been in her corner; he's always served Aleksander faithfully.

He's literally the worst person on the *entire continent* her body could have decided she *wants*, because he probably doesn't feel the same, is more likely than not disgusted by what she felt *-for that slight moment-* and he's going to scold her for it.

Oh, Saints, he's going to scold her for it. She'd rather drown.

It's her fatal flaw that she ends up desiring men that she shouldn't. It's like a *curse*. She doesn't want Ivan because he's nice, or kind, or goes out of his way to make her feel special. It's none of that, because he's *none of that*.

It that awful part of her, rearing its head again. The weak part of her that enjoys his physique, is drawn by his power and confidence, has started to enjoy how it feels when he crawls under her skin with his small science, wanting to know what it would feel like if *he physically crawled under her skin with all that raw, predatory strength-*

She sits up sharply, gasping for air, listening as water splashes over the sides of the tub.

Distantly, she hears the front door close, hears him kick off his shoes. Alina groans and curses herself for not drowning herself seconds ago.

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** Comments and kudos are loved ♥

So. Once again, I wrote a behemoth chapter that was so effing huge, I needed to cut it down the middle again. Literally, it was roughly 15-16K words and I know some people loathe looking at chapters that long. Therefore, **this is part I of part II**. I'm probably going to polish up the second half and post it in like 2 or 3 days from now, but because technically, I meant to post this all in one go, but it was just HUGE. I didn't want anyone going cross-eyed reading the whole thing in one go, but I also don't want you to wait long for some of the fun that goes on in the second half.

---

Other random fun notes from my re-watch of the tv show:
*If you want to see a few hidden gems that nod to the Ivan & Alina dynamic in the books, take a peek at the first half of episode 4. Alina is eating with Marie and Nadia and as she's talking with them, Ivan passes behind her, for literally no good reason. Alina turns her head, catches him looking at her. They share a mutual glare, as if he's mentally scolding her for being useless and she's like, f$ck off dick. It's such a quick scene that I literally didn't see it the first time I watched XD
*Or episode 5 when Alina brings Kirigan his kefta when he's expecting Ivan to do it. She 'apologizes' for not being Ivan and Aleks smiles and says, "Do I sense disdain for my heartrender? You know, once you get to know him, he's actually quite funny." Alina replies, "I bet you find volcra hilarious."

# Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Honest to all that's holy, Alina avoids him with every fiber of her being after that debacle.

She starts her mornings earlier than normal, *way earlier*, slipping out of the house just as the sun starts to rise.

The irony is not lost on her that she is now the one pulling an avoidance tactic instead of him. It's not that she's repressed or anything absurd like that; she's just mortified and ashamed of herself. Every night she replays it over in her head and she cringes at herself.

Ivan gives her space, which is also quite annoying. It's annoying that he *knows* she needs space to sort out whatever it is she's going through.

Well, then again, *that* only lasts for so long. You can't completely avoid someone you live with indefinitely. Even if that would be desirable.

By the third day, just as she's sneaking out of her room, buttoning up her shirt, she stops dead when she walks into the kitchen, the orange glow of the morning sun starting to warm the room. Ivan's lounging in one of the chairs, his arms crossed over his chest, legs spread as he looks at her expectantly. He doesn't even have the courtesy to look *tired*. "Is this a new time for us to get up each day?"

*Us*. He says 'us' like they literally don't breathe without the others say so. Hells, what are they turning into? A singular being? *Saints*.

Alina feels her face heat. "The sun has been rising earlier for summer; I'm just getting up with it."

The corner of his mouth twitches. "You're dead tired. You don't want to be walking around right now. You haven't even been eating breakfast before you leave the house."

"How the heck would you know?"

"Because you eat like a common tavern slob."

Clever rat bastard. Alina runs her tongue over her teeth as she considers how she wants to worm her way out of this apartment.

"I need to water Fedyor," she takes a step around him to go to the plant on the windowsill, but Ivan reaches out and grabs her wrist, stopping her from passing him by. A zing of awareness runs up her arm and Alina allows it to wash over her. This is becoming a common occurrence when they touch.

"No need. I already did. Sit down."

She doesn't like it when he tells her what to do. She's never liked it, for as long as she's known him. Giving him a displeased look, Alina slowly slides herself into a nearby chair, sitting up like a Queen, as if it was her plan all along and not his.
He watches her, his eyes going half-mast. "You've been avoiding me."

Oh, Ivan's going for the kill right away. Alina gazes off somewhere to the side, attempting to hide a pout. "Maybe."

She starts drumming her fingernails anxiously on the table, one of her legs bouncing. Ivan misses nothing, looking at her very obvious signs of distress with a toned-down version of his signature disdain for her existence.

"This is your response to the other day? You *cannot* be serious."

Alina flushes, stilling her fingers with effort. "Well, if you're going to scold me, then get it over with. I know you're just dying to lecture me on how inappropriate I am, especially considering I'm *the Darkling's prize*."

His brow furrows and his serious eyes flicker up and down her rigid posture. "I'll have to disappoint you; I have no intention of doing any of that. I don't see what the point would be." He finishes with a scoff. "You never listen anyway."

"Oh." Alina utters, feeling her spine relax slightly. Then, she realizes what he said towards the end. She gives him a disgruntled glance. "I do listen to you. I listen *perfectly* well. I just don't do what you tell me to do- not all the time, anyway. There's a difference."

"Fine. I wanted to tell you there's really no solid reason for you to be embarrassed about getting-"

Alina feels like sinking straight into the floor. Covering her heated cheeks with her hands, she interrupts him, saying fast, "Can we not bring this topic up? There's literally no reason for us to talk about this."

"Are you really going to be a child about this? You hid from me for three days!" He's leaning forward in his seat, arms crossed yet again, looking at her incredulously.

"Well, are you going to keep spying on my lady parts? Because I'm having some serious anxiety about that and you knowing-"

"It's not intentional," he snaps, a slight hint of red crawling up his neck, the way she's noticed it does when he gets flustered. "If the blood flow in a person takes a sharp, directional change-"

Oh, he is not doing this. Alina holds up a hand. "I don't need to hear the textbook science behind it, Ivan. It happened. I don't want it to happen again."

He huffs out a puff of air. "I can't promise you that."

They sit awkwardly for about a minute, Alina examining her fingernails. She has ink under a few and she really needs to fix that up soon. "It's not an open invitation. What I feel," she

says quietly. “It’s not a come-on, I mean. I hope you know.”

“I wouldn’t even care if it was,” he says dryly, watching her face carefully.

Alina gives him a skeptical look at that comment. But who knows, maybe his moment of physical interest was a fluke, just like hers.

Oh, right, hers wasn’t a fluke, so…

She flushes. “Could you just…not bring it up if it happens again?”

He’s got his elbows on his knees, body posture suspiciously lax. “And how do you want me to do that?”

“Just…don’t react.” Alina makes a useless gesture with her hands. “Just pretend I don’t exist or something. *I don’t know*.”

Ivan’s looking away again. “Like I said, I can’t promise anything.”

Alina feels her mouth twisting. Usually everything he says is stated with complete confidence and nothing he just said had the same strong quality to it. She squints at him. “Why don’t you sound very convincing?”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Ivan sits up straighter in his seat and gazes off at nothing in the hallway. “Could be because…it tends to cause a chain reaction…in our case.”

Oh. *Oh*. So, he feels it and that sets him off. In her mind, Alina can recall the dilation of his pupils, staring over at her in the forest, on his knees beside the cove. There’s nothing magic about it; it’s simple animal lust. Most males find it exciting when the nearest female presents herself, knowingly or unknowingly, in a ready-for-action state.

“How lovely.” Alina couldn’t possibly sound less overjoyed. It seems she’s doomed to suffer more embarrassment, but at least she’s not the only one. She digs her fingers into her tired eyes briefly, thinking through how she wants to proceed. “You know, I used to be sure we weren’t simple barn animals, but now my confidence is completely shook.”

Ivan smirks a bit at that.

Alina sighs, it’s a fact of life and they can survive this small little…inconvenience. *Just acknowledge and move past it…you don’t need to solve your whole life every single day…*

“Well, I’m glad that’s been aired. I’ll be mortified for another three hours, minimum.” Alina stands up abruptly, fiddling with her shirt again. She can cope with unnecessary attraction. Right? Even if her taste is absolutely wrong and questionable. “Let’s go eat. I’m starving,”

Ivan frowns, mouth in a thin line. “Is anywhere even open at this time?”

“Yup. I’ve been eating out the past few mornings. The pub has early breakfast, it turns out. A lot of hungover drunks from the night prior, but the coffee is good.”

He’s following her down the stairs, stretching with his hands behind his head. His back cracks loudly and Alina cringes, saying, “Must you do that so loudly?”

When she hears him chuckle lowly, she knows she’s in trouble. “I could say the same for certain things *you do*.”

…and he’s already making jokes about how easy it is for him to sense her bodily state.

“Gross,” she mutters as she flushes with embarrassment. “Stop reminding me how gross I am.”

He’s looking at her out of the corner of his eye as she drags him towards the pub for brunch. “Is this another delusion of yours? That I’m disgusted by you?”

“I can’t imagine you finding me any other way.”

Ivan snorts. “Suit yourself.”

Their street is still quiet, most of their neighbors only starting to wake up. The morning sun peeks over the tops of the buildings around them, golden against the slowly brightening sky. The birds are chirping, singing their daylight songs from the rooftops.

Their situation certainly isn’t perfect, as far as situations go. But, it could also be a lot *worse*.

---

---

Awareness is like a plague that spreads quickly.

Now that it’s out in the open, this strange…unspoken feeling between them, Alina can’t help the way her gaze constantly catches on Ivan, even when she’s not even thinking of him.

It isn’t just her either, she realizes with a distant sort of dismay. Occasionally, when she’s out of the apartment, chatting with Katja in front of the flower shop down below, about art and flowers, she’ll feel a slight ghost of sensation pass over her. During those times, when she looks upward, more often than not she’ll see Ivan coming home from being out for the day, heading towards their front door.

He’s usually not looking at her when she looks to him, but she *knows* that Ivan’s utterly aware of her.

She doesn’t press him about it, even if it’s slightly invasive. Alina comes to understand it as a ‘*hi, I’m home’* sort of thing from him. She normally would jot it down as another anti-social aspect that comes with Ivan, but the reality is that a simple touch with his power is far more intimate than him vocally saying hello.

Which…is also a little distressing. Alina worries that the more they dig their heels into pretending they are fine, the more they continue to slide into dangerous territory.

Or, there's the way he doesn't mind being around her quite as much as he used to. She's reading quietly one evening when he sinks down into one of the armchairs, saying, "Read it to me."

With a cocked eyebrow, Alina replies, "I didn't think you liked Fedyor's romantic nonsense."

"You heard me."

"Well, then come over here, I'm not shouting romantic love stories across the room at you."

"I'm not coming any closer," he says dryly, leaning his head backwards languidly, neck exposed and eyes closed. "You might get funny ideas in your head while reading."

"That's fine," Alina quips jokingly, running her eyes over the line of his throat. "I'll catch you in bed later."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," he drawls, eyes still shut, carrying every single vowel he can in that lazy way of his.

---

---

*She dreams of the mountain pass in Shu Han. The high winds and the dreary snow at the very peaks of the mountains. The chill winds, crawling downward into warmer, green valleys.*

*The dream is of the day that Aleksander moved the Fold there, over the pass, over the natural barricade. Alina remembers the small, rural villages at the base of the great mountains, the farmland and the livestock.*

*She remembers the screams of horror and confusion as darkness descended upon them.*

*Women, clutching their children, trying to shield them from the coming destruction. They knew there was no fleeing what was coming for them, a darkness full of vengeance and hatred for all non-Grisha.*

*Alina remembers how it felt, her power shielding herself and Aleks as the Fold moved forward like a plague. His hand on her shoulder, using her power as his own. She'd long found that fighting him never worked.*

*"It's a necessary evil," Aleksander whispers into her ear afterwards, his hand stroking gently through her long, dark tresses. "One day you'll appreciate what I do for our people."*

*"It doesn't have to be like this," she replies, covering her face. "When will you be satisfied?"*

*The Fold is howling and crackling in the distance, its monsters shrieking in the dark.*

*His lips touch the collar around her neck, a symbol of his ownership of her. "I'll be satisfied when every last threat kneels at my feet. I'll be satisfied when the Grisha rule and never have to fear persecution ever again. We are so close, Alina."*

*She stares upwards at him, eyes long dried of tears, only empty with a numb sort of sorrow. "We're so far. We're so far and you don't even see it. You are blind."*

*Aleksander's face freezes, eyes darkening with irritation. He's never liked when she refuses to see things his way. "If thinking that way makes you feel at peace, you are welcome to it."*

*Tensing, Alina says, "I'm not wrong."*

*"You're not right either," he replies stiffly, the shadows darkening in the corners of his lavishly midnight tent.*

*She presses her lips to his, feeling the magnetic draw of his power. Into his mouth she utters, "Even your own mother calls you a monster."*

*That night, she leaves Aleksander's bed to sleep in her own tent, full of a hard, bitter feeling. She barely settles into her own cold sheets when two sets of hands grab her, throwing her to the ground, a garrote going around her neck. Someone is sitting on her, pinning her arms while the other pulls the cord tight.*

*Alina thrashes, feeling her heart pounding like a herd of horses across an open plain, trying to struggle, but these men intend to kill her, to stop the forward motion of the Fold entering Shu Han. The cord is cutting off her air and everything goes dark.*

*She wakes to being slapped. Ivan is crouching over her, his face shifted into a snarl. "Where are your guards?" He sounds furious, eyes like black pits in the darkness of the tent.*

*There are dead bodies next to her, blood dripping out of their eyes, ears, and mouths.*

*Alina can't answer, no noise is coming from her throat, her eyes caught on the dead, bloody lumps beside her.*

*Ivan sneers, "I'm speaking to you. Focus. How did this happen?"*

*Alina picks herself up from the ground with as much dignity as she can, shaken. Her voice is grated and rough, her throat aching. "I-I was with the General. They thought I was still in his tent…"*

*Ivan gives her a hard look, disgust plain in his voice. "You thought that was wise, leaving his bed with Shu Han agents circling our camp? You. Are. Without. A. Single. Braincell." His hands come up to her throat and she jerks away from him instinctively.*

*He scoffs at her in antipathy and catches her, his small science pushing the bruising away from her flesh, easing the pain in her throat. His power feels just as rough as the injury and if Alina didn't know better, she'd think he was being rough on purpose.*

*She bites her lip and looks away from him as he works, hating him, hating everything. When he leaves the interior of her tent, he doesn't really leave; instead, he stands guard outside, like some sort of angry dragon watching over a treasure hoard.*

*Alina hears him calling out to some underlings in his demanding tone. "Remove the corpses from the Sun Summoner's tent and display them at the edge of camp. Shu Han will think twice before sending more."*

*It's amazing she gets any rest at all.*

~*~

She wakes up feeling annoying alert. Must be the aftereffect of reliving being nearly killed in the dark by some Shu Han assassin. With a shaky hand, she touches her throat, as if expecting to feel raised, swollen flesh, the injury from the rough garrote.

Instead, there is only smooth skin, flawless and pale.

That was years ago now. It still disturbs her and seemingly proves what she's believed all along; Aleksander has not made people feel any warmer towards Grisha. She flops back into her pillows and groans, staring up at the dancing moonlight on her walls, the wind combing through the leaves of a nearby tree.

Is it bad that she's not having a panic attack and she still wants Ivan to come be with her? It's been understood that her panic attacks need assistance…but she doesn't have a good reason for right now. Maybe she just wants to see him, considering his old self featured in her dream and it's setting her on edge.

The way he treated her as an object bothers her, needles her. It's almost like she has some unbridled urge to confirm to herself that it isn't the case any longer. That the cold, indifferent man in her dream isn't the same man she lives with.

…which is stupid because he *is* the same man. He's the same man that's always shown her nothing but disdain for the majority of her life, Aleksander's right-hand man, dutifully keeping her in line. He's also the same man who is there for her when she needs him, all she has to do is *ask*.

Cursing herself, Alina leaves her bed.

"I need you," she calls into his room, because they are mostly beyond long, winding explanations these days.

"…you do?" he asks, voice thick and sleepy. He's grumbling. "Give me a minute."

Instantly, she feels bad. She's making him get out of bed because she wants *reassurance*, of all things. *Saints, I'm so selfish,* she finds herself thinking as she quietly pads back to her bedroom, her feet loud on the wood floor. Her eyes dart around her room as she tries to consider-

*Aha.*

She digs into her bedside drawer and glances at the amber bottle. She figures a spritz or two of Fedyor's cologne in her hair will be a nice, soothing gesture for him. What wouldn't she have given to have someone smell like Mal and let her be held by them for a few minutes? Will this make up for her being completely unreasonable?

Alina feels like she needs to provide *some* sort of value to Ivan. He's been helping her when he could just as easily tell her to man up and go pound sand. That would be totally within reason, coming from him, and yet he never does. At least, not about this.

Even though she drives him mad, Ivan's not asked for a single thing in return.

*"He's selfless," Fedyor had told her as they watched Ivan give orders to a group of Grisha. The young recruits scrambled like alley cats, trying to do his bidding, as if on fire. "He's the consummate protector and he never does anything because he expects something in return. There's no one in the world like him."*

*Alina could only distantly admire the way that Fedyor loved Ivan, heart and soul, even if she never quite saw the same things in the man that Fedyor did. In fact, she quite hated Ivan… and Ivan felt the same about her. "He's different with you," she'd said. "I've never seen the man you speak so highly of."*

*Fedyor had sighed, dark eyes always holding a hint of sparkle in them. Like midnight stars, obsidian and lovely. "That's a sorry thing, my sad little sunshine."*

The scent of Fedyor's cologne in her own hair makes Alina think of him. Somehow, he was this warm ray of sunlight, even as a heartrender. Alina hears Ivan finally making his way to her room, so she climbs back into her bed, thinking, *well, hopefully he's not pissed about what I just did, because this could go terribly wrong.*

Ivan's silhouette comes through her doorway and he's rubbing at his eyes, trying to come more awake. "Well? What's the issue? Your heart seems fi-"

"Bad dream. I'm having a bad case of insomnia now." It's not entirely a lie. She pats the bed and says softly, "Please?"

She doesn't often ask quite so sweetly, but it seems to work, for what it's worth. Ivan sighs and comes over to her, his small science already drifting over her body, checking her over. Alina refuses to feel nervous about it; instead, she forces herself to embrace it. Any tension, any resistance in her body, she pushes away, leaving everything open to him.

Complete trust and vulnerability, because she knows that he likes it. Frankly, she thinks it gives him a bit of a power trip, knowing she's willing to bare herself in such a manner.

He pauses by her bedside, inhaling sharply. "It feels different when you do that."

"When I do what?" She scoots over, making room for him.

"When you don't fight it," Ivan says lowly, sounding a little surprised. "A part of you always fights my heartrending, even when you ask for it. What's changed?"

Alina carefully picks her words, because she senses that this means something to him. The man who so rarely displays his feelings cares about what she says next. “I trust you not to harm me, Ivan. Even though I know you could.”

She can see the way his proud shoulders seem to tense in the moonlight. Well, he’s feeling something about her words; sadly, she’ll never know exactly what.

When he gets on top of the bed and reaches out his hand to grasp her wrist, he goes still. There’s still a good distance between their bodies, and yet Ivan inhales shakily, so different from his usual confidence. “You smell like him…”

There’s a small crack in his voice and Alina feels her heart leap. She sits a little closer to him, scooting over the pale sheets. “You can pretend I’m him, while you do this…if it helps? I feel bad, making you help me all the time and I don’t do all that much for you so…”

He’s gazing at her, but it’s too dark to determine what’s in his eyes. It could be anything, really.

Nervous, sitting in the shadow of his larger silhouette, Alina gestures to the door, “Or I can go wash it off really fast-”

“No. Keep it on. I like it,” he says without hesitation.

Alina looks up at him and swallows thickly. She’s jealous of how easy it is for him to admit to liking something so intimate, where she would be embarrassed about admitting the same. It feels like her heart is in her throat.

“…are you sure?” She sounds hesitant, and one of her hands anxiously dances across the collar of bone.

He’s shifting closer to her, closer than he usually does. She can feel the heat of him and the way that the bed dips with his weight. The dream and the doubts that came with it are already drifting away from her, just with his presence. The scent of his skin is filling her nose.

“I’m sure,” he utters quietly. His hand travels up the inside of her wrist, very softly. Alina feels the slow crawl of his power crawl into her as he does so. His voice dips, dark like chocolate, “I’m very sure.”

Alina shivers, for more reasons than one. The feel of him in her veins, his physical touch pulling her closer. How close does he intend for them to get? Feeling very far out of her depth, Alina babbles, “I know you two were together a long time…and I can’t claim to know if you guys enjoyed touchy feely, comfort snuggling, but-”

His voice is astoundingly flat and she’s glad she can’t see his face. “I’m a man, not a rock, Starkov.”

“To be fair, it’s hard to tell with you sometimes,” she jokes, her heartrate gone over the moon at least five times already. This is new territory and she’s not sure how she’s supposed to *behave*.

“Be quiet,” he mutters, sweeping her up into his arms, taking her completely off guard.

Alina doesn’t even know how to react, her first instinct being to leap away.

In his arms the way she is, it’s easy to feel the soft rumble in his chest, the way he inhales the scent of Fedyor’s cologne. She feels the warmth of his power just under her skin, slipping through her veins like a drug. Instead of keeping to *just* that, he fluidly syncs her heart to his, much to her surprise. The last time he did that was on accident, this time is clearly on *purpose*.

Alina realizes with a faint bit of awe that it’s a self-soothing action for him, something he likely enjoyed with Fedyor. She told him to take whatever comfort he wanted from her…and he is.

All the tense sensation in his body relaxes and Alina finds that to be *amazing*.

Even if her heart isn’t the one he wants, it’s so…so empowering, somehow.

The darkness takes her in a slow, easy wave, dragging her under until the world melts away.

~*~

It’s warm and she feels cozy and protected. Alina wakes with a soft sigh and stretches her body like a lazy cat, slowly coming to the realization that there’s a strong body along the entire line of her back. Her feet drift in the entanglement she’s found herself in, because she’s caught up with a pair of legs that aren’t her own and this stretching thing isn’t working out as she planned.

There’s an iron bar around her waist and it flexes as she sleepily squirms through her stretching.

A puff of hot air shifts through her hair and Alina comes to the very slow conclusion that Ivan *is still in bed with her*. Naturally, she’s a little surprised, because he’s never been there when she wakes up. For a moment, her brain freezes, because she doesn’t know how to begin processing this information.

Alina tries to sit up, but she can’t move. He’s got a strong grip and his hold on her only gets tighter the more she struggles.

So much for escaping before he notices the situation they’re in. She flushes, because her sleep shirt has ridden up and his arm is around her bare skin, his hand just at the underside of her breast. He’s pressed her so tightly to his front that she can feel his chest moving with his breathing.

Warmth coils inside of her, even as she tries to temper it down. His breathing is, *unfortunately*, not the only thing she’s aware of pressing against her.

She pats the arm holding her. Nothing. His deep breathing continues and Alina feels herself scowling, coming more and more awake by the second, her pulse beginning to pick up. He’s

got to hear that eventually, doesn't he? Trying to shift out from under his grasp doesn't work either and she's only rewarded with a sharp press of his hips against her, slow and firm and-

Panicking, because there isn't much separating them *at all*, she pinches his forearm hard, croaking out, "Okay, wake up time, Ivan. I know I smell like him, but time to stop dreaming; I'm definitely *not* Fedyor."

There's a half chuckle that rumbles down her spine. He's awake? "I could never mistake you for him," he mumbles roughly, sounding half-asleep still. "You're too small."

*Well, that was the perfect excuse to explain this situation away easy, great job dismissing it, you blockhead,* Alina thinks wryly.

Because *really*. She's trying to politely ignore what's pressed up behind her, hot and hard. Honestly, it's pretty difficult to do so, because a very big part of her doesn't mind it being there. Which is *a problem*. She can practically feel the pulse of his heart and the sheer intimacy of that fact makes her legs clench. Heat flashes inside of her and she feels her insides flex with a certain need, the age-old desire to be filled-

"Don't start that nonsense, Starkov." Ivan's voice is still uneven with sleep, his warning lazy. His manhood twitches, as if disagreeing with his own advisement.

Is he for real right now? She fusses with his arm with both of her hands, trying to pry him off. "We discussed this! I can't help it any more than you can!" She really can't; every interested twitch from him causes more heat to pool between her legs, the delicate parts of her swelling.

He's like an immovable rock. "Yes, but you don't need to exacerbate *my problem* by projecting the way you do."

Projecting, he says? *Projecting*?! Alina is going to claw him.

"Oh, please. You cannot tell me that Ivan the Terrible gets worked up over me squeezing my thighs together." She says it as if she isn't aware that it's a bit more than just a simple squeeze. As if she doesn't have that hazy morning arousal assaulting her right about now, curling in her belly like a hungry tiger.

Ivan's arm tightens briefly around her waist. He says, "If you're doing it about me, I'm sure you can see how that fuels the fire."

Indignant, Alina replies, "Um, hello? You're the one projecting into my spine!"

"That's not personal," he snaps, sounding a bit more awake. "I woke up this way."

Two can play that game. "Well, maybe I did too."

"Except you *didn't*."

Alina groans in frustration, because she's positively aching at the moment and not having any method of fixing her problem is maddening. "Alright. I'm leaving."

“Good.” Ivan sounds relieved. “You do that.”

“…this is my bed.”

He makes a noise that’s a strange mix of a growl and a groan. His arm finally releases her and he sits up sharply, looking down at her with dark eyes. Alina keeps her own interested gaze from gliding over the tent he’s pitched.

Ivan’s breathing isn’t even and that’s when she finally gets the courage to meet his gaze. What she sees there causes her breath to catch in her lungs.

His dark eyes are on her keenly, pupils wide, eating away his irises. His hands flex, as if wanting to reach out to her.

“Tell me to go,” he rasps, his eyes dancing over her mouth, over where her breasts push against her thin shirt.

A very awful part of her wants to tell him to stay, she wants to tell him to push her down into her mattress and stay for *a while*.

It takes all her willpower to say, “You should go, Ivan.” Because that’s what he wants her to say.

His throat works and his jaw clenches, but he closes his eyes and exhales before doing as she says.

~*~

By lunchtime, it’s a mostly distant memory that they both pretend doesn’t exist. They’re getting good at that, apparently.

“Are we going for a hike?” She asks him as he’s pulling on his boots. It’s Saturday and they have nothing going on that she’s aware of.

“You’re coming?” He looks up at her in surprise.

“Why not?” She feels a little restless and he probably does too. “It’s nice out.”

“You better not slow me down,” he mutters as they leave, outward into the bright sun.

“…and if I do?” Alina loves pressing his buttons, now that she knows which ones are more harmless than others.

“I’ll leave you.”

“You’d *never* leave *me*,” she laughs, head tilting backwards. Sunlight is warm and comforting on her face.

The way he sighs tells her she’s right.

Their daylight hours follow their usual routine.

Their nighttime activities change; he stays in her room on the nights that she asks after his ‘heartrending services’.

It’s as if both periods of time have been compartmentalized, completely separate from each other, with a stateless way of no part of the period prior being brought up or mentioned.

Alina finds herself not minding waking up next to someone else. Her nightmares have begun to ease, slowly. Less and less, though no less potent when they visit her. It’s a rainy afternoon when she realizes that she’s not slogging through waves of grief anymore.

*I’ve hit acceptance,* she realizes vaguely. All the open air, the freedom, all of it giving her room to grieve and move on. Alina never thought she’d see this day. Would have never believed it if someone told her three years ago she’d feel fine again.

She wonders if Ivan feels the same.

It’s harder to tell with him, but she’s certain that he’s approaching the acceptance stage of grief, beginning to look for things to help him cope with his loss, ways that are healthy and normal, instead of destructive and fueled by anger. Everyone moves through the many stages at their own pace and Alina knows he was at his worst when Fedyor died nearly three years ago. She thinks they hit his bumpy road with depression the past few months, accompanied with his silences and foul moods. Hell, she went through depression herself as if it was a forever path; never-ending.

He processed grief easier than she did and she’s not sure how it’s even possible. She supposes it’s because the majority of his grief was spent peacefully, with space and time, where Alina received none of that for years.

She had so little time to actually grieve when she was at the Little Palace, constantly being carted across the continent, always being asked to be the face of the Grisha movement. Always in the spotlight, needing to appear perfect. Aleksander *never allowed* her to grieve.

Alina never reached the final stage of grief, over all those years, dragging herself through the mud. Now that she’s reached acceptance, it’s been washing over her with a strange sort of calm. *Relief.*

She’s been trapped in a cycle of suffering for decades and maybe it could have ended sooner if he’d allowed her the space to come to terms with her losses. Sadness still touches her on the shoulder on certain days, but she thinks she has come to terms with a lot of things.

Now, all that’s left is her guilt, about so many things. Haunting her nights, reminding her of how she’s been responsible for the deaths of people whose names she will never know.

At least, her mind is beginning to become clear. Without the weight of her loss dragging her down, maybe she can focus on ***strength*** again. Who she is on the inside and what she wants from her life; not what Aleksander wants.

---

---

*It isn't often that she dreams of the first time Aleksander took her into the Fold with the intent of using her power as his own. It's a very old, shameful memory.*

*She remembers the way it felt, when she tried to refuse Aleksander. The way his deep well of strength poured into her, pushing and pushing, filling her to the brim until the only thing she could do was release her light, encasing the skiff so he could safely work, but leaving the Fold intact.*

*He forced it out of her, controlled her, bent her to his will with power. Like a table of cards, folding hard. She loathes remembering the way that Novokribirsk perished so easily under his might.*

*The dream only serves to remind Alina that she hates how weak she's been. That she refuses to live that way ever again. There's only one oddity in this memory; the Stag. She frowns as she sees a distant beacon of pale light, far in the distance, as if calling to her.*

*Waiting for her.*

*It turns away from her and she calls out, saying, "What do you want from me? Wait!"*

It's dawn and the sun is out as the dream dissipates. She wakes up sprawled rather inappropriately, one of Ivan's strong thighs between her legs, her mound pressed tight against it. A certain part of her is throbbing with awareness from the friction and for a horrid moment, she wonders if she'd moved against him in her sleep like some sort of hussy.

Because…if not, she'd *really* like to.

At least he's not awake. To her knowledge, anyway.

Disentangling herself carefully, Alina grabs a new pair of underthings from her drawer, quietly, heading off to the bathroom. She sits on the toilet and mentally thinks to herself, '*go pee, go pee, go pee*,' until it works, because it's near impossible when her lady parts are all worked up like this.

Changing into a fresh, non-damp pair, Alina washes up and leaves, heading into the kitchen. After preparing the coffee, she gets a little bit of water for Fedyor, getting the soil damp. She leans forward to inhale the floral scent of the orchid when-

"Are you hitting on my partner?" Ivan asks in that drawling tone of his, stepping into the kitchen.

Alina runs a soft fingertip over one of Plant Fedyor's lovely petals. "I whisper sweet nothings to him every morning."

"I bet he likes that."

*That's a positive thing*, she thinks. Him being able to speak of Fedyor without that underlying misery in his tone. She even detects sarcasm in his voice! She tilts her ear towards the plant with a smile, as if the plant is going to tell her a secret. "He says I'm rather good at it. So, yes."

"False," Ivan says in that superior way of his. "I've never heard anything remotely sweet out of your mouth in the morning."

"How would you know?"

That awful smirk of his makes its appearance and it makes Alina dizzy. "Because I'm next to you in the morning. All you do is *snore like an ox*."

Going bright red for all the wrong reasons, Alina scoffs, waving him away. "I absolutely do not."

Their eyes meet and briefly, something passes between them, making Alina think that maybe, maybe he wasn't so sound asleep when she left him this morning after all. Maybe he felt the way she had a leg up over his hip, her center riding his upper thigh, hot and warm against him, her soft exhales ghosting over the base of his throat.

Her stomach flips and she looks away.

He sighs.

---

---

Business is unexpectedly booming at the map shop.

"We have a new commission," Timur tells her as she's organizing completed maps on the far side of the room. "An expensive one."

Viktor pops up from around one of the desks. He'd been scrubbing spilled ink off the floor. "What are they looking for?"

"Might need some research for this one." Timur turns his attention back to Alina. "They want to see when the Fold split Ravka in half, *volcra* details inside of the Un-Sea, and they want a record of all secret paths through it detailed on the map."

Alina pauses in her organizing, visualizing it in her head. "I believe I can show three different hidden networks that smugglers used back then. I'd have to go to the library to see if I can

find record of any others." She frowns. "Why do they want that detailed?"

Her boss shrugs. "Hell if I know. Why do any of these people want to stick old, dead maps on their walls? Probably lost family in the smuggling trade, who can say?"

It won't be too difficult for Alina to work with the map. She asks about any special requirements around colors used, paper type, typography for the city labels, etc. "I'll get started on it today," she assures him pleasantly.

~*~

"Are you going to the summer festival next week?" Viktor asks her as he watches her work, hours later.

"I hadn't really planned on it. Never been to one anyway…" Alina tilts her head this way and that, tongue in her cheek as she determines her next move.

"Didn't you at least go last year? No? You *have* to go. The fireworks are amazing. Can't speak for anywhere else, but our city puts on a great show. If that doesn't convince you, the vendors always show up with great food."

"You know, I'm always down for food," Alina mutters, leaning downward to make a very tight modification. "Maybe I'll attempt getting Ivan out. He's *utterly* disinterested in social gatherings."

Viktor makes a face, as if in pain. "Oooo. Good luck."

She flicks ink at him with a laugh. Then, she returns to drawing a *volcra*, hovering like a winged, eyeless demon inside of the Fold. Viktor looks on with morbid interest, saying, "You're really good at drawing those. How much practice did that take you, to get the detail so perfect?"

*A lot of close encounters,* Alina finds herself thinking, staring down at the hideous, evil-made beasts.

Her smile fades away and Alina finds herself muttering, "Many, *many* years."

---

---

She's been waiting for one of them to make a mistake, one of these nights.

It's clear that they've been sharing a bed because they *want* to, no matter how both of them verbally ignore it. It's like an unspoken rule now between them; *don't talk about the why or the all the reasons not to*.

The why is simple; Alina wants him. She wants his awful sneer, to feel his teeth in her spine, wants his raw strength holding her. There's nothing sweet or innocent about how she feels and there's certainly nothing decent about it.

If anyone is to blame, it's her fault, because she acknowledges herself as a pursuer. She's always been the one to ask him to ease her nights, even if he's the one who offered his services up in the first place. Alina doubts he ever imagined it would evolve into what it is now.

As for the reasons not to? Alina has none. She wants what she wants and Aleksander has always taught her that she should take what she desires. It's what he would have done. She's an apt pupil, as he would say. She learned from the best.

Ivan has reasons not to. *Boatloads*. She feels it in the way he restrains himself, the way he seems to be scolding himself mentally if his eyes linger on her for too long. In his mind -*and she knows this*- she belongs to his General, the man he trusts and would follow until the end of the world and he's poaching on his territory recklessly while the man isn't there to protect it.

Or, that's what she imagines the general thought process to be.

That's why, when they finally slip up, Alina almost isn't surprised by the way he restrains himself.

It's late in the night when she wakes up fuzzily, feeling a little too warm, considering that maybe she needs to open a window. They've been sleeping in their shirts and shorts still for modesty's sake, even if the clothes are barely a barrier between them. Ivan's still sleeping soundly, his body slightly spooned up behind hers.

Alina considers moving out of bed until she realizes that Ivan's hand is gripping her inner thigh, mere inches away from what's between. If she moved, just a slight bit, his fingers might even brush against her, to flicker over her folds. Her breathing goes shallow instantly and sparks of interest burn through her.

*This is dangerous,* she warns herself. *Stop thinking about it or you'll frazzle him too. Let him sleep, unscathed.*

The problem is, it's tunnel vision for her, focusing on the feeling of his large, capable hand on her bare skin. Imagining him moving his hand, thinking about him touching her where he really, *really shouldn't*.

She feels when he comes awake; he's always been a relatively light sleeper and even more so when he's near the pounding organ in her chest. He goes still, listening to the way her heart is rapidly beating, quickly determining she's not upset from a nightmare. She's not upset and he can certainly tell what the problem is from the way she shifts, trying to alleviate the deep ache inside of her.

It's almost painful, the state she's worked herself into. Maddening, unable to think of anything but what's between her legs and what will make it better.

Alina puts her face into her pillow and makes a small sound of dismay. She wants him to touch her, more than she wants just about anything right now. Her underwear is damp, hiking up between her folds, every inhale like agony as the fabric moves against her heated flesh.

Her heart is in her throat and Alina wonders if she should get the hell out of bed and hopefully let him get back to sleep in peace. She moves to leave, but his formidable hand stops her, his hold tightening, holding her in place.

Alina's breath catches. *What is he…?*

Ever so slowly, like a snail across an aquarium, his hand inches towards where she wants it to be. Giving her time to pull away, to tell him no. She doesn't say a damn word, her mouth going dry with anticipation, feeling like a roaring fire all on her own. She's practically trembling.

When Ivan cups her over her thin shorts, Alina feels herself melt. She tries to bite back an embarrassingly relieved moan, but it slips out regardless. Wordlessly, he grinds the heel of his palm against her, and Alina hates how easily she grows moist, feels herself becoming slick, starlights of pleasure bursting behind her eyelids.

Her breathing goes rough, spine arching.

Oh, she can't believe he's doing this, but she dares not say a thing and risk him *changing his mind*. It's been a while since she's been touched intimately and her sensitivity is off the charts.

Helpless, she moves her hips, seeking more friction against him, her small bundles of nerves throbbing with the need to be relieved.

When his fingers slide under her clothes, moving into her slit, feeling her, she's lost. Slowly, meaningfully, he rubs her, feeling how wet she is for him. Those rough fingertips stroke across her soft inner lips, sending zings of sensation up her spine. It's almost too easy, how he works her into a sweating, panting mess.

When Ivan finally fills her with his fingers, they both groan, enjoying the new sensation of having him physically touch her from the inside. Alina's shaking and she feels like she needs to hold onto something before she falls apart, forgetting every single reason why this is a bad idea, too far gone.

She places a hand on his and presses him to her harder, craving more, when suddenly he's crooking his two fingers upward and…

…and it doesn't take very long. *Embarrassingly*. She can feel his small science flood her, right at that moment, sending the sensation inside of her off the charts.

With a bitten off cry, Alina crests, spilling over his fingers, tightening around them. A growl rumbles low in his chest and his manhood throbs at her rear. He pants wetly at her shoulder where her loose neckline has shifted to reveal her skin. His teeth scrape across her briefly and Alina shivers, absurdly wishing he would bite her, suck a mark onto her pale skin.

It seems someone has come to their senses, because Ivan removes his hand from her, dragging upwards across her belly, shifting his body away from hers. His fingers leave a trail of her arousal across her belly.

“Ivan,” she whispers, confused, “What about yo-”

“I’m fine.” He’s not. His voice is rough, the way it can get when he’s been shouting over a battlefield.

“But,” Alina tries to turn, wants to press her hand against him, would love to hear him come undone-

“Go back to sleep,” he murmurs, he fingers signaling a stronger command of his small science.

“Wait. No! That’s not fair…” she tapers off.

She drops soundlessly into a dreamless sleep and only has a brief second to hate how easily he can end a conversation, just like that.

Especially at such an inopportune time.

~*~

He’s breathing deeply, sprawled a foot away from her when she wakes up. *Well, at least he didn’t leave, so clearly he’s not running.*

Alina sits up, clutching a sheet to her chest, staring down at him. He always looks much more peaceful in his sleep, less ticked off at the world. It’s amazing to her that he seems to think a foot of space between them is actually suitable, considering the night before.

*What did he do, choose to sleep on the other side of the bed after thoroughly molesting me?* Alina’s face heats, even as she rolls her eyes. *Probably thinks he’s protecting my chastity still or something equally ridiculous.*

Maybe he views her getting pleasure from him as no betrayal of Aleks…but if the reverse happens, it’s unacceptable. Alina can almost imagine it; ‘*if **she** wants you to touch her, obey her, but if **you** want to touch her, hands off*’.

It’s absurd and Alina isn’t sure why she can’t have more. If they’re going to be out about this, why not embrace it fully? It doesn’t have to mean anything; Alina is no stranger to physical lust and the act of easing it.

It doesn’t have to mean a thing, but a part of her knows that between them, it likely wouldn’t be meaningless. She knows Ivan; he was never the sort of man to even glance at another person; he was happy and thrilled with Fedyor. He’s painfully loyal and certainly not the sort to even consider casual sex. *Nothing Ivan does is **ever** casual.*

He’s completely opposite to Alina and her constantly drifting affections, the way she was always bouncing between her love of Mal and her unstoppable draw to the Darkling.

*I wonder how he's going to be when he wakes up,* Alina ponders. She's not even sure how she feels about the physical release he so selflessly provided her with in the dark. Does she thank him? Or are they going to file that memory away in their little mental folder titled *'Things That Happened at Night That We Don't Mention During the Day"*?

She assumes they are probably going for that angle.

Sliding out of bed, Alina dresses for the day and goes into the kitchen, going about her normal morning chores before starting on the coffee.

As she's pouring herself a cup, a body brushes up behind hers and Alina gasps in surprise, nearly dropping the coffee mug in her hand. Ivan grips it, cupping his hands around hers. "Feeling jumpy this morning?" he rasps with sleep still caught in his throat.

She can't concentrate, not with him pouring himself a cup from just behind her, the heat from his body radiating against hers. Remembering the rough sound of his breathing, the feeling of his fingers… "You just surprised me. I thought you were asleep."

"A heartrender would know if someone was approaching from behind," he says arrogantly as he steps away from her.

"I cry every night that I'm not one," Alina replies sarcastically, leaning her hip back against the counter. "Big ugly sobs."

She watches him give Plant Fedyor a small bit of water, before sauntering off to his seat. The way he looks at her gives her a thought and it makes her frown at him irritably. "You snuck up on me on purpose, because you know I can't hear your heart! *You enjoy it*, I think."

"Guilty," he says, not sounding sorry about it whatsoever. Typical.

He sits down at the table, a sign that he's not about to pull an avoidance move on her any time soon. Ivan sips his coffee and munches on a bagel very calmly, as if he didn't just bring her off in the middle of the night.

Alina's eyes drift over his hands. They're nice, strong hands. They feel even better when he's-

"How did you sleep the rest of the night?" She asks, because she honestly cannot just *not* bring it up, even if red dusts across her cheeks.

It's a little embarrassing, but they were both involved, even if he didn't allow her to return the favor.

Ivan chokes on his coffee for a bare second and then coughs into his shoulder. "I've slept better," he mutters before coughing again.

Feeling a hint of wicked, Alina squints at him and leans forward a bit where she's leaning against the countertop. "Maybe you should have said 'yes', then, yeah? Because I slept *wonderfully*."

His face darkens unexpectedly and she knows he's running through his mental checklist of how to reject her so he can keep his relationship with Aleksander in tact for all eternity. "Alina, we can't-"

"If you change your mind…" Alina wiggles her fingers and allows her words to hang as she heads towards the stairs to leave the apartment for the day.

*You know where to find me.*

~*~

His restraint turns out to be ironclad and Alina really shouldn't be surprised by that. The man is basically a machine, always on duty.

What happened that night doesn't happen again. He even sleeps in his own room the following three nights, as if in protest to how willingly Alina allowed him to…what…take advantage of her? He *didn't*.

She doesn't tease him about it when, by the fourth night, he comes back to bed with her. She doesn't say a word when he syncs her heart to his and crawls into the sheets beside her, inhaling the scent of her on the nape of her neck.

It seems that even if he's denying what he wants, he's not good at denying it for long. He and Fedyor had shared a bed for somewhere around forty years; she never contemplated that perhaps sleeping alone isn't something he prefers.

For such a cold, serious man, she wonders if there really is a soft underbelly, hidden somewhere under all that harsh and unyielding attitude.

"If I'd known you'd be gracing me with your presence tonight, I would have put on the cologne," Alina says in greeting as he situates them for the night.

"You're trying to tempt me and it won't work," he mutters. "Behave, or I go back to my room and you can toss and turn all night."

Well, jeez. *Fine*.

---

---

"Go with me, will you?"

"No. I don't want to go to that frivolous faire."

Alina had hoped he'd say that. She tosses her hair, taking one of her deep vanilla orchid perfume oils and rolling it behind her ears and on her wrists. He's distinctly watching her from where he's seated, watching the way she puts some balm on her lips.

His eyes narrow. “Who did you plan on going with?”

Well, that bait was set rather easily. She doesn’t often primp before she goes out, she he notices when she does. Hiding her face with her hair briefly, just to hide her smile, Alina replies, “I’ll meet up with Viktor and his friends since he told me about it.”

His left eye twitches. “…Viktor?”

Alina really has to fight a smile down. “You know. From the shop-”

“No.”

Turning around, Alina gives him a faux confused glance. “No, you don’t know him or-”

If looks could kill, Alina would already be dead. “You’re not going with that insignificant boy, not looking like that.”

She looks down at her pale blouse and simple black capris. She snickers and throws her head backwards, unable to keep from cackling, “Ivan have you lost your mind?” The outfit is not that enticing and he’s acting like she’s stepping out in a silken robe.

“I’m about to, thanks to you.”

It’s almost comical that she knew this is how this would play out. Almost to a tee. It’s hilarious that he actually thought she would stay in if he told her no. She’ll win this battle, Alina is certain. He’s going to go with her; he just doesn’t know it yet.

“I’ll be fine. It’s a well-attended event, regardless-”

“More opportunity for criminals, you mean.”

Alina rolls her eyes and fixes her silk scarf in the mirror, primping. “As I was saying, there will be a lot of people around. He grew up here, so he knows the in’s and out’s of where to go. *Safely*.”

Ivan is not having shit. Any of it. “Clean out your ears. I already told you that you’re *not* going with him.”

*Pfft*. Alina is well aware. She pretends to wave his concern away. “You don’t need to worry about me. He’ll protect me. You can take the night off.” Okay, maybe she’s laying it on too thick now.

Ivan’s jaw clenches and his eyes are practically spitting fire. “I saw that boy. He couldn’t protect the ground under his own boots, let alone *you.*”

Saints, how is this man so easy to bait? Flash red in his face and off he goes like a bull. Taking pity on him, Alina sighs and says, “Fine. I’ll go alone. I really just want to see the fireworks.”

His head tips backwards and he's staring up at their ceiling hatefully. "You're not going with a useless boy, nor are you going alone. *I'll* take you, if you're so hellbent on going to this idiotic affair."

*Ah. Sweet victory.* Hopefully her heartrate isn't giving too much of her feelings away, because Ivan will get salty if she gloats.

She sits on the arm of the chair he's scowling in and says with a winning grin, "Maybe I knew you'd say no, so I got ready knowing you'd end up going just to keep me from going out with someone else. What do you say to that?"

The muscles in his face relax only slightly. Saints, his features are perfectly stone cut. "You're *trouble*. If you're not careful, I'll start catching on to your schemes."

Winking at him playfully, Alina replies, "Saints forbid. I guess I'll have to be more careful with you, won't I?"

~*~

Despite it being dark, the middle of the city is well lit by celebration lanterns for the summer celebration. Different vendors are outside, selling treats from local restaurants or exotic things from across the sea. Different theatre acts play out in the brightly lit market squares, bringing delight to old and young alike.

The air is warm with the scent of baking dough, powdered sugar, and roasted nuts. The wind is very slight, only an occasional chill. The stars are shining above and everyone seems to be out late, waiting eagerly for the main event of fireworks.

As a pair, which feels so wild to Alina, all things considered, she and Ivan walk through town, eating ice cream and watching with vague amusement at the different shows on display. It fills Alina with a childish sort of joy, being able to go and enjoy something simple and meaningless, surrounded by normal people without a single care about tomorrow.

A vendor of jewelry grabs Alina's interest with some lovely starlight earrings and the minute she tries one on, just to see how it glitters at her ear, Ivan buys the set for her. "They look lovely on her," the seller gushes, because that's what sellers are paid to do of course.

Ivan's arm is around her shoulders unexpectedly as Alina pushes in the second earring. "Yes, they do."

In a moment of surprise, Alina looks up at him sharply, wondering if he really meant it or if he was simply playing his part as doting live-in boyfriend. He doesn't return her glance, so she really can't say for sure.

"Thank you," she says as they walk away. "They're really pretty."

"Don't be a suck-up," he drawls, but his tone is pleased.

He doesn't remove his arm from around her shoulders and Alina leans into him, enjoying the casual touch. Or not so casual, whatever it means with him.

"*Heeeey Miss Lina*," she hears a trio of teenage voices sing-song out to her.

Turning to look over shoulder, Alina catches sight of some of the older girls from the orphanage, the ones closer to fourteen, fifteen years of age. They're waving and giggling behind their hands. Alina gives them an acknowledging smile and nods at them, well aware that their curious eyes are drifting to the man who has his arm around her shoulders.

"Is that your *boyfriend*?"

Alina glances at Ivan out of the corner of her eye and shrugs a bit. "He must be, don't you think?"

"Are you guys going to smooch under the fireworks?" The tallest girl asks teasingly. "*Everyone* does that."

Ivan's eyes are probably rolling right out of their sockets, but Alina isn't going to look. Hopefully he's behaving.

"Oh, I don't know. Kissing boys is a bad idea," Alina says in return playfully, even as Ivan, true to form, drags her further up the street. There's a specialty *kvas* vendor and she can feel him zeroing in on that.

The girls hoot after her and Ivan's lips touch the shell of her ear as he says, "Sleeping with boys is a bad idea, too."

"Thank goodness I sleep with men," she says smoothly, feeling the way his hand flexes on her shoulder. "Much better idea. *More experience*."

"Saints," he curses under his breath. "Can't you control yourself?"

"Why…are you having trouble controlling yourself?"

His eyebrow near twitches with irritation at that, but he ignores her question and instead pulls them up to the *kvas* vendor. Alina looks at the different flavors and colors with interest, because they do actually look quite tasty.

After frowning with indecision, Ivan picks a bottle and pays for it, dragging Alina off towards the hills under where the fireworks are supposed to take place.

They sit down on the grass, passing the bottle between the two of them. Alina coughs on her first pull, because apple flavored or not, it still has a serious burn to it. Ivan cracks a slight smirk at that, taking his own deep gulp without a hitch.

Alina watches his throat work and wipes her mouth, telling herself to look away, that she really should behave like he advised. Luckily, at that moment, a bang goes off above their heads and the glow of the fireworks bathe them in multi-colored lights.

A cheer goes up from the spread-out spectators; some still in town and others sitting outside of it, watching the sky. More sparkles and loud bangs go off, measured in time, dancing with starlight and color against the midnight sky.

Gazing drifting to Ivan again, Alina bites her lower lip and nudges his shoulder with her own. “See? Isn’t this better than being trapped in our apartment all night?”

“Maybe.” He’s staring upward, bottle still pressed to his mouth lightly, as if he’s thinking of drinking again.

“Just admit it; you’re having fun. I know you hate fun, but you’re having it,” she says, chuckling, taking the bottle from him for a sip of her own.

He turns to look at her then, his eyes going half-mast as he watches her delicately sip from the bottle. Alina’s acutely aware of his gaze on her mouth and she anxiously ducks her head a bit before handing him the bottle back.

She’s getting the impression that he may actually want to taste her mouth. Not kiss her, because that’s far too tame a word for a man like this.

Beyond the slight, enjoyable tension between them, it’s nice to peel back his strong layers of armor and see the hints of a man underneath. Calm, self-assured, and protective. But, even beneath that, he’s utterly attentive in his own way, even if he pretends that he can’t stand watching out for her.

“Thanks for coming with me,” Alina tells him just as another explosion of light goes off above their heads, bathing them in a glow of royal purple and deep gold.

He takes the bottle back. “Someone has to keep an eye out for you.”

As if he hasn’t been doing that for over four decades already. Alina could either burst out laughing or bawling over that fact, she’s not entirely sure which.

It’s been nice, she thinks, to get to know him away from all that chaos. She’s only ever know him as her main guard, her jailer, Fedyor’s longtime lover, and Aleksander’s ruthless right hand. Having him just be *hers* is another thing entirely.

It makes her think of Fedyor again and she searches her mind for a fun memory, a good story to tell him that he might not know. Her tipsy mind comes across a very old memory and it makes her burst out with shocked laughter, so loud that even Ivan gives her an odd look.

Wiping a tear away from her eye, Alina says with a too wide grin, “Did I ever tell you what happened at the Winter Fete, the one just short of thirty years ago?”

He scoffs, eyes still looking over her as if she’s lost her mind. “What’s there to tell? I *was* there.”

*Oh, just you wait, Ivan*.

She snickers uncontrollably, because she’s already playing the memory in question over in her head. “Okay, okay, I’ve never told you, but this is a great story. You’ll absolutely hate it, but I’m going to tell you *anyway*, because-” She bursts out laughing again, her giggle box open and loose from the alcohol. She hiccups suddenly and Ivan makes a disparaging comment about her being a lush that she needs to wave away.

Gaining control of her diaphragm once more, Alina continues, "***-anyway.*** It was one of those dog and pony shows where all these dignitaries were supposed to see how 'powerful' I was and 'magical' and bow before my 'might' with a pretty light show. I loathed all that. So, it was late and I'd fled the main ballroom, looking to escape all the staring and awkward hand shaking, when I stumbled across that ridiculously voluptuous Countess. Do you remember the one with the very fake red hair? Oh, *Saints*, she was liquored *up* so hard that night and she had her victim pinned up against some old portrait of the King. Pinned like a B – U – G."

She's really not exaggerating. The Countess had a reputation and no good-looking young man could be counted as safe.

Ivan seems to be searching through his memories, trying to recall this particular beast of a woman. He snorts lightly and nods, a subtle sneer touching his mouth. "Which unlucky soul was it that time?"

Alina crushes down a laugh, but her face is hurting from smiling. Oh, he's going to come unglued. *Unglued!* "I came around the corner and it was dark in that particular hallway, but you really can't miss her when she's making her big move. There she is, her claws tight around Fedyor's junk, effectively pinning him right there, in place up against that portrait, and he clearly needed saving, based on the absolutely horrified expression on his face-"

"*Where the hell was I*?" Ivan sounds scandalized.

"Mystery of the universe, am I right? Oh, Saints, calm down! This was so long ago; I'm not done telling you the story. Shhh. *Shhhh, Ivan!* What are you going to do about it? She's practically dead now, you knob. *Anyway*, as I was saying, I wasn't about to let him get sexually assaulted by this sweating, predatory broad, so I stepped in and asked for her to let him go, but *she was not having it*. She clearly didn't recognize me, because she slapped me right in the face, calling me an uppity little slut. I guess she forgot what the black *kefta* meant…or was she onto something? Maybe she meant it literally? Hmmm…" Alina ponders that.

Ivan's expression is dark. "…and?" Oh, of course, he's not worried about her being called a slut, he probably thinks the very same, even if he damn well benefits from it and enjoys it to boot, the bastard.

"Oh. *Right*. Well, Fedyor was too much of a gentleman to defend himself from her groping to throw her rather large ass across the room, so I was more than happy to dump my drink down the front of her lowcut gown. That woke her right up. She abandoned him for a hot minute to claw at my clothes and she ripped my hair ornament out, throwing it across the room. It broke, which was bad, because it was the Queen's. But that's *another situation entirely*. I digress-"

"You aren't digressing," Ivan drawls, eyes dancing over her face, taking in the excited glimmer in her eyes. "You're *wasted*."

Alina scoffs. Perhaps. "**Anyway**, unfortunately for me, this woman was much bigger than I- and she was hellbent on teaching me a lesson for interrupting her…*ah*…intended conquest.

She put me in this sweaty awful headlock, ***reeking*** of her overly musky perfume, I was choking on it-"

Ivan makes a noise of disgust and Alina wholeheartedly *agrees*.

"…and then Fedyor finally threatened her with his heartrending. I remember her shrieking at him that he '*wasn't allowed to use his small science against members of nobility*' to which Fedyor replied, "*Seeing as you're threatening bodily harm to the Sun Summoner, I can do just about anything I want*.' Oh, you should have seen how fast that cow dropped me!" Alina giggles, wiping tears from her eyes. "Anyway, I thought I'd share that lovely memory of me defending Fedyor's honor."

Ivan is giving her that inscrutable look again. "Sounds like he saved you instead."

Trying to take the bottle back from him, scoffing when he holds it out of her reach, Alina says, "Well, I did save him one way or another, because if I hadn't come -*give me the bottle, Ivan*- that woman would have dragged him away to her cave and had her way with him. I did you a *solid*."

When she snags the bottle from him finally, Ivan lies back into the grass with a groan. He runs a hand over his face, briefly, as if wiping some old unwanted emotion away. "He was so much trouble. More trouble than he was worth."

She pokes him in the belly with a single finger. "Oh, shut up, Ivan. He loved you to death."

Ivan's voice is quiet. "I know." It's left unsaid that he still loves Fedyor, will likely always love him.

"I don't know why," Alina slurs. "You're an absolute bear. You aren't even charming; you're just a beastly brute."

He snorts, disinterested. Likely, because he knows what her lady parts think about him. *Ugh*.

Feeling dizzy, Alina lies down and curls up in the grass next to him. Her palm rests on his chest and he allows one of her legs to curl over his. He's a warm beacon, because even the night air has a hint of a chill, a ghostly farewell to spring as the hour gets later.

"Are you taking advantage of me, Sun Summoner?" He sounds amused, his chest rumbling under her palm.

"Can I?" She may be mumbling.

He goes quiet for a moment, exhaling slowly. Ivan sits up and looks down at where she's haphazardly sprawled. "Is that really want you want?" He sounds suspiciously tired, as if this has been weighing heavily on his mind, knocking him around until he can't stand thinking about it anymore.

Alina gazes up at him and wonders what he's really asking of her. She's too hazy to make a real decision in the matter, but she knows that she wants him. She's been fighting this attraction for weeks now and she doesn't want to keep fighting it.

She bites her lower lip, her tongue darting out to wet it briefly. His eyes follow the motion and his jaw clenches. Reaching for his hand, Alina makes as if to pull him down, would happily give him whatever he wants, but he's not moving-

"We have an audience," he says to her, his eyes still on her mouth, dark and longing.

That breaks the spell for Alina. She sits up quickly, feeling the *kvas* spinning her head. "What?! *Where*?!"

Giggles echo from the treeline and Alina recognizes those voices. "Girls!" Her voice is loud and scolding, her face completely red hot. "Matron Anya would have a few things to say about you being out so late! Get home and stop spying on me!"

"Aww, Miss Lina, you're no fun" and "Just when you were getting to the good part" and "how did he know we were here" plus "alright, we'll go" all ring out in a terrible mess of high-pitched, teenage chattering.

Sitting crossed legged with her arms wrapped around herself, Alina stares at the treeline with more than a bit of a disgruntled expression.

Ivan says after a few minutes, "They've gone."

"We probably should go too," Alina utters, looking downward at her shoes. Had she really been prepared to kiss him? Ivan?

It's one thing to have a guy get her off…it's another thing to want his mouth on hers.

She's a little nervous about what that means.

---

---

They stumble home a little unevenly, but all jokes aside, they still make it safely.

He's walking towards his room and Alina instantly feels herself not wanting him to go there. It's a strange tug in her ribcage and she blames it on the *kvas*. Wanting to try and head off his action, she walks to her own room and says expectantly, "Are you coming?"

Ivan pauses, just outside his door. There's a certain hesitancy in his stance. "Starkov."

Alina stares at him, confused. That tone. The use of her surname. He's emotionally distancing himself, just like that. It's sobering. "What's the problem?"

He looks a bit uncomfortable. "I don't know if this…if this should become…routine for us…"

Her heart clenches anxiously at his words and Alina can see by Ivan's pained expression that he's felt it too. "Why?" She asks with a slight air of petulance. "Are we doing something wrong?"

Ivan's throat works and his eyes suddenly won't meet hers. Alina watches his profile, sees the way his jaw tightens. *Oh*. Oh, he's being ridiculous! Seeing as he seems to be reluctant to say anything, Alina says, "You're *mostly* a perfect gentleman. It's *fine*. It *doesn't bother* me-"

"That's not the point and you damn well know it. My restraint can only go so far." His eyes meet hers again and there's something very dark brewing in his gaze, something that makes her breath catch. "It's one thing to allow me to help you sleep occasionally, but to have me share your bed every night…" He grits his teeth. "…you're not mine. I can't have you forgetting that. *I can't* forget that."

The air nearly dies in her lungs. That's an admission of desire if she's ever heard one.

"Do you want me?" She asks it tightly, her jawline stiff with emotion.

"It doesn't matter what I *want*," he replies harshly, his eyes burning into hers like dark fire. "It never has."

"What if I want it to matter?"

His smirk is unpleasant, somehow very self-depreciating. She's never seen him look that way. "It still wouldn't change a fucking thing."

A rush of anger heats inside of Alina, a thorned, ugly thing. "Despite what you and a man I won't name might think, I don't belong to anyone," she hisses out through her clenched jaw. "I can have whoever *I want*."

It comes out as a lie, because the collar hidden around her neck says another story entirely and they both know it.

He looks away from her, throat working with some sort of dark emotion. "You and I both know that there's more to it than just us and what we want. You're the Sun Summoner. *He's* the Darkling. He *trusted me* with you-"

"I don't care!" Alina snaps, feeling the alcohol heating her blood with anger, ready to snap into pieces. She wants to claw her own ears off, because she doesn't want to hear this.

"Well, you should care," he rasps, voice raw. "And I should have never touched you."

Alina feels a bit like she's been sucker punched, hearing those words.

Her feelings on the matter are fraught with strife and upheaval. On one hand, she understands the danger that he's seeing, understands the thin road they have been walking together. The other hand doesn't care, because she likes how he makes her feel. She doesn't *want* to give up the peaceful nights, the way she feels wonderful the next day. She's always been the sort to enjoy closer companionship with a single person and right now, she's happy with *him*.

Why does he have to make it be like this? Her throat suddenly feels tight and she turns to go into her room. Rejection stings terribly and everything suddenly hurts, like getting needles stuck bit by bit into her heart, like a pincushion. Is she going to cry? Saints, she really hopes not, at least not in front of him.

“Alina.” Ivan's voice sounds wrong, all strained. What right does he have to feel hurt? “Don’t feel that way-”

The last thing he needs to be doing is telling her how to feel.

“Why? I thought how I felt didn’t concern you.” Her voice trembles terribly. She shuts her door with a hard slam and goes to sit on her bed, head in her hands. She struggles with herself, trying to figure out why it all feels like rejection instead of Ivan’s typical common sense.

She does cry, it turns out.

~*~

*“He doesn’t deserve Ivan’s loyalty,” Fedyor told her as they watched the foreign dignitaries bow low before Aleksander. At his side stands his right hand, the only man more feared for his power aside from the Darkling himself. “Like calls to like, I suppose. We’re looking at two men that prefer to protect what they care about through power and fear.”*

*Alina couldn’t bear to watch much of the proceedings, hating the despairing expressions on the dignitaries faces. “I never wanted any of this. All this pain and dread. I just wanted to help all of Ravka. Grisha and non-Grisha alike. I hate how they look at us; as if we’re all monsters from their nightmares.”*

*“That’s why you have a good heart,” Fedyor whispered, brushing the back of his hand against hers in a show of comfort and understanding. Then, he winked. “Like calls to like with us too, I suppose.”*

*She gave him a tired smile that felt more like a mask. “Of course.”*

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** Comments and kudos are loved!!! ♥

I think we can all appreciate that this turned into 12,000 words XD Could you imagine if I left last chapter and this one as a single chapter? OMG. Anyway, I think we can safely say...this isn't going to end in 2 more chapters. I suspect there will be more.

...and oh, Alina. Thinking of him as yours already is such trouble, lass.

# Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

////////////////////////////////

*And my heart's misbehaving*
*You know I can't fake it*
*Nothing can shake my faith*
*My lips start to quiver*
*You make me a sinner*
*Cause I ain't no saint*

*"Unholy" – Lilith Czar*

////////////////////////////////

The sound of the birds chirping outside makes her skull pound.

Groaning morosely, Alina acknowledges the fact that her body feels like trash, likely from all the *kvas* the night before. She feels shaky and ill, for more reasons that just one, but she's not in the mood to dwell on all of them.

Mentally cursing the birds, she spends roughly ten minutes convincing herself to roll out of bed, her naked feet touching the floor with lazy intent. For a second, everything spins and feels too hot, dehydration draining her.

She feels like she's trying to walk through sludge.

*This*. This is why she doesn't usually drink *kvas* from a bottle. It's too easy to lose track of how much she's drank.

Alina's still in the same clothes she wore the night prior, which isn't a very good sign. She sighs and moves like a sloth as she picks through some fresh clothes, numbly discarding what she passed out in. Hopefully her eyes aren't still horrendously puffy; she recalls crying for a decent amount of time.

*Kvas* and stupid emotions are never a good mix. She should know this by now, shouldn't she?

In the bathroom, she spends some time dry heaving. Her stomach is torn between rebelling and craving sustenance. She splashes water on her face and tries to not see the darkness in her eyes, the dents in her armor.

He got her fucking good last night. Drew her in, just to yank it all away. *It's like a perfectly architected torture,* she thinks, staring at herself. Then, anger flashes through her. *Why do you care so much, stupid girl, you don't even* ***like*** *him.*

Maybe if she repeats that to herself, she'll actually believe it.

The kitchen is thankfully empty when she gets there, sullen emotion in every bone of her body. She opens the windows, basks in the fresh air that wafts in, inhaling sharply. It smells like sunlight outside and Fedyor's petals sway in the gentle breeze.

It's quiet out; it's quiet in the apartment, too. It seems the whole town is sleeping in after all the late-night festivities.

Unfortunately, Alina doesn't have the patience for tiptoeing around, not with her limbs feeling heavy and sluggish. Her head throbs, a vein pulsing in her temple. She groans and briefly presses her forehead to the cool counter, trying to numb the pain for a moment.

She drinks multiple cups of water as she makes some pancakes, wanting the fluffiness to soak up the alcohol in her body. Grabbing a book, she puts it flat on the table and sits down with her food, flipping through the pages as she chews slowly.

*I should figure out what I'll teach the children this week in class,* Alina finds herself thinking, wanting to focus on other things. Maybe she can find an excuse to help Matron Anya more this week-

The floorboards creak and the hair on the back of Alina's neck rises.

"Good morning," Ivan says to her neutrally as he steps into the kitchen.

Alina's tongue traces a cut in her cheek, a part of her feeling very much like a hermit crab, ducking back into its shell with supreme antisocial energy. "Hm." She drinks her water, as if that absolves her of her rudeness, her blatant disinterest.

Ivan pauses while pouring himself coffee, glancing out of the corner of his eye at her.

*Oh, you don't like my response?* Alina thinks bitterly. It seems he's going to go the route of pretending nothing is wrong between them. *Swell, Ivan. Swell*.

He doesn't make a comment on it, instead he sits down at the table with her and pours syrup over the pancakes on his plate. As he eats, he keeps glancing at her, as if wondering why she's not talking to him. It makes Alina want to scream. Her skull is killing her and she rests her temple on her hand as she continues 'reading'.

"Are you feeling sick?" Ivan asks finally. As if he can't tell, as if he can't hear the atrocious amount of blood and swelling going on in her head right about now.

Noncommittally, Alina lifts one shoulder and drops it, a dismissive shrug.

Ivan can definitely sense the unpleasant miasma floating in her body, caused by dehydration, because he reaches out to touch her wrist, as if seeking to make her feel *better*-

An emotion bathed in shades of red and black flashes inside of her, with snapping teeth. Instantly, Alina slaps his hand away, hard enough that an audible smack resounds in the kitchen.

Everything goes still. A pin could have dropped and it would have sounded like thunder.

Ivan's face darkens as he stares at her. "What the hell was that for?"

Idly, she takes another bite from her pancake, flipping the page of her book. "I don't want to be touched."

*I don't want to be touched by you,* hovers unspoken, like a fog of wasps, buzzing angrily.

He stiffens, shoulders going tense, his Adam's apple bobbing as he watches her. "I can help with the pain-"

He can help with *the pain*? What about all the pain he's *caused* her? Can he help with that too? Even though her throat feels tight, Alina keeps her tone empty. "I wouldn't want you to exert yourself over something so trivial. Especially considering you made it very clear last night that you aren't interested in continuing with such activities."

"How did you get all of that out of what I said last night? You *always* overact." Now, Ivan sounds pissed. "Don't you understand that I'm trying to keep the boundaries clear-"

"Good job. You do that." Alina gets up and returns to her room, intent on getting into her sheets again and trying to sleep away her hangover, without his stupid help.

…she doesn't *need* him, she doesn't need *him*, she absolutely *doesn't*…

~*~

That night they eat in an awkward sort of silence.

Alina goes to her bedroom with a simple goodnight, without giving him a second glance. He doesn't want to be near her anyway, so there's no reason to even continue with this farce. She's not going to humiliate herself by asking him to heartrend her again.

When she enters her room, she audibly locks the door, just to make it very, *very* clear.

---

---

It's fascinating how the dynamic shifts when Alina does her best to ignore him. She feels like there's some sort of absurd rope locked between them, only she's not the one yanking and pulling anymore. In a totally unexpected turn in events, *he's* now the one pulling.

Distantly, Alina understands that he still wants companionship from her now that he's had it for the past two years, but he's trying to sterilize it in a fashion she wants no part of. As mad as it seems, she won't accept this bastardized version of what they could have; she wants more and she isn't one to accept anything less.

She won't play pretend with her emotions. She's made it very clear what she wants and he's made it very clear what he *doesn't*.

It's obvious -*and has been for years*- that Ivan is used to having orders followed. Whatever comes from his mouth is considered law amongst the Grisha. Except for Alina, naturally, because simply bowing to authority has never been her creed.

He expects her to kowtow to his demand that they keep their base natures out of this whole business, all because of *duty* and *loyalty*. Well, fine; but she's not going to play nice and pretend it didn't hurt when he rejected what they could have had.

What she still painfully wants.

So, she's been punishing him. Punishing him with detachedness and throwing all sorts of walls up.

"Are you working today?" Ivan's eyeing her outfit, running his gaze over her as if he has some sort of Saint-given right to do so.

It drives her crazy. She wants to shake him.

"I have art class with the kids at the orphanage." She's roaming around their living room, gathering up supplies that seem to get scattered as the week goes by. Idly, she stuffs things into her bag, feeling rushed to get out of talking distance of him.

Not wanting to stick around for more conversation, Alina heads towards the stairway, bag over her shoulder, needing to get out of the apartment, needing to stop breathing the same air as him as soon as possible-

"Aren't you forgetting something?" His tone is low, brushing across her eardrums roughly.

*What is he talking about now? I have- oh.*

Alina goes stiff as a board and reaches a hand up to her collarbone, cringing. He's right; she's completely bare. Spinning on her heel, finds herself already running into his chest with a squawk of surprise. Stepping back slightly, Alina avoids his gaze as he towers over her, the deep blue scarf that Genya had requisitioned for her so long ago in his hands.

She can feel him looking at her bare collarbone, practically taste the way his eyes glance towards her jugular, watching her pulse. Alina swallows, trying to will away the response her body is having to his proximity. She reaches out to take the scarf from him, but he instead settles it around her neck himself.

When the back of his hand brushes her bare skin, she shivers, hating herself. She wants to take his hand and press it over her heart, wants to feel that large, powerful hand slide downward-

"There," he drawls, eyes dark and unreadable. He knows everything in her mind, just based off her pulse, a fact that makes her feel naked. "Now, you may go."

“Thanks,” she replies stiffly, lifting her chin in defiance. Trying to ignore the weakness of her body, a body that just keeps betraying her. “Not that I needed your permission.”

His eyes narrow at that and he looks like he wants to say something Grade A asshole, but he refrains, jaw clenched tightly, teeth grinding audibly.

They’ve been reduced to short, sharp sentences again and it appears he wants nice, pleasant Alina back.

Too bad, pal.

~*~

It’s a scorcher outside, so the children opt to draw underneath some of the old trees in the yard of the orphanage. Alina’s main plan for the day has been foiled, considering of all the things she managed to cram into her knapsack, she forgot the most important of all; her own sketchbook.

She’d drawn the Stag in very dark ink and had intended on allowing a few children to trace from it, allowing them to learn some muscle memory in the act of drawing it out, but alas, it wasn’t meant to be. No way in hell is she returning to the apartment after her lady parts snitched on her to Ivan again.

Enjoying the breeze when it sweeps through the area, Alina makes her way around, checking in on the children that want help from her. She pauses behind Henrik and frowns in confusion at his drawing. “Henrik, what on earth is going on here?” It looks like a wild jamboree of frog people in wild outfits and blobs everywhere.

“I’m getting married,” he replies very seriously, drawing what he must imagine to be an attractive veil, which actually looks like a tent balancing on the head of the…bride.

Some of the older children snicker at that, a couple of the teenage girls hanging around in the trees, gossiping and observing.

Alina’s eyebrows go way up. “Are you? To who?”

“To you of course! In a few years. When I’m older.” He points a finger at her. “Wait for me, woman.”

Dissolving in a fit of crying laughter, Alina has to wipe tears from her eyes. “Oh, I don’t think that’s going to work. But, I’m flattered…”

“You idiot!” One of the older girls says loudly from her perch. It’s one of the trio that Alina usually sees hanging about, the same from the night of the festival. “She’ll be married before you even grow a beard! She has a *boyfriend*. He was five seconds from having his tongue down her throat last weekend. I saw it with my own two eyes.”

There’s a lot of *ooo’s* and *ahh’s* and *gross* that follow that statement.

Alina’s mouth drops open in mortification. “That is absolutely not true!”

“Boyfriend isn’t husband,” the boy pouts, wanting to defend the hope he has for his doomed crush.

The blonde girl points at something behind them with a smirk. “Tell that to him then.”

*Oh, it cannot be, this is not my day,* Alina finds herself thinking as she slowly cranes her head to look behind her.

Yeah. It’s Ivan, stepping through the iron gates with something tucked under his arm. Alina feels her heart drop into her stomach and she’s not sure how to respond. He’s never come here before; how is she even supposed to react? She feels frozen with shock for a moment.

The children, however, are not motionless for long, especially not the older teenagers. The teenage girls are giggling, jumping down from their tree branch to go bring him closer. The three of them swarm him with big smiles, pulling him towards Alina, all while talking flirtatiously with him.

“We were *just* talking about you.”

“Your biceps are like, like, *so* hard. Like wow.”

“How tall are you? Miss Lina is like, *so* lucky. But like, do you *ever* smile?”

Ivan’s dark eyes flash over to Alina, as if begging her to save him, but that’s absurd because Alina feels like she’s the one that needs saving right about now.

“What are you doing here?” Alina asks him, feeling disorientated. This is *her* place. This is her *thing*. He can’t…he shouldn’t be here, in her bubble. She tries not to sound too rude, considering the children would wonder why she’s not being nice to her significant other. She’s not one to promote unhealthy relationships to the impressionable.

Ivan holds up her sketchbook, the one she’d totally missed during her mad dash out of the apartment. “I thought you might need this,” he says flatly. “Was I wrong?”

Taking in a deep breath, Alina approaches him and the girls, taking the sketchpad. “I…*ah*… yes. I did need this.” She turns and looks for Paula, holding it out to her. “Paula, come here sweetie. Oh, don’t be shy, come here. This has the Stag you wanted to draw.”

The little girl takes it with a big shy grin and runs off to her place under the tree, laying a blank sheet of paper over it, starting to trace the dark lines Alina made.

The older girls are still harassing Ivan, so Alina steps in and shoo’s them away. “Don’t you girls have better things to do? *Go*.”

They make smooching noises and scoot off, their laughter loud as they return to the large oak they tend to hang around in.

Alina sighs, watching them go. All the children seem occupied for the moment, so she sits down in the grass, hugging her knees to her chest, enjoying the heat of the sun. She’s not sure

how to cope with Ivan being here, but he doesn't give her much time to think it over. Unexpectedly, he sits down beside her, a bare few inches between them.

For a moment, she wants him to put his arm around her, but then reminds herself he doesn't want that with her. As she's thinking about him, something flickers in her chest and she's certain it isn't her doing. She presses a hand to her sternum in surprise at the jump there. "Is that my heart beat?"

Ivan's stone-cold face goes even more tense as he admits reluctantly, "It's mine."

Alina gives him a look, because he just synced their hearts together for absolutely no good reason. No reason whatsoever. She scoffs a little, because she's still…angry with him. Bitter? Hurt? "Um, it feels unpleasantly erratic. Must we?"

His eyes dart over her face, as if slapped. "You want me to stop?"

Blinking in confusion, Alina stares at him. *He wants them to stay connected?* After all the damn drama he caused that night of the summer fest? She honestly has no words for what she's thinking and feeling right now, but she's also out of whack because his heartbeat is not making her feel very pleased at the moment.

Is he trying to torment her? Is that what this is?

While looking at him, she gets the distinct impression that he really doesn't want to release his heartrending power from her. He wants to keep track of both of their hearts and it's absolutely absurd. How is this acceptable, but a night in bed *isn't*?

How is this blatantly intimate desire of his any more palatable than her desire to have him soothe her nights?

Saints, it pisses her *off*.

She rejects his hold on her, insides tightening up with revulsion and anger, the way she always used to when he used his heartrending on her. It's not fear this time; it's just pure resistance.

He feels it, naturally. Ivan looks offended. "Why are you doing that again?"

"Because I want you to *stop*." She says this quietly, trying to appear outwardly calm.

"I don't want to," he replies just as quietly.

"I'm going to beat you," she says sweetly through gritted teeth, annoyance brimming like an overfull glass of water inside of her.

"Great. When?"

"Don't tempt me with that sort of foreplay," she replies.

He snorts, rolling his eyes. "Clever."

She realizes that she once again relaxed into his heartrending hold on her, allowing him to peacefully sync them together. It's offensive how easily she gave in.

Because really, she loves the way he feels and she can tell he misses her, if he's dragged his ass out to the orphanage.

He can't stand children, so that has to mean something, right?

---

---

A week passes and she grits her way through the many restless nights. Alina had gotten so used to being able to sleep through the night with Ivan at her side, that having an empty bed again, full of nightmares and bad memories, is unpleasant.

She's stubborn and prideful, a terrible mix.

In theory, she could go to him still, but she won't. Now that she's had some time to process her initial emotional reaction to what he said that night, she sees what he's getting at. She realizes that sharing a bed with someone every night typically has emotional connotations connected to it.

He's emotionally repressed and she's always pressing for more than he's willing to give. And there's the whole steadfast loyalty to the Darkling that he has, getting in the way even more.

Alina's a troublemaker and she always has been. Probably always will be. But he knew that going in, so that's not much of an excuse.

She's struggling with the feeling of rejection. It's hard to not feel that way, because the lines between them have blurred terribly. He's possessive of her, as if she's an object he owns, but he's unwilling to do anything about it, but also *unwilling* to let her step out on him. Alina wants long nights and lazy mornings, which disrupts the distance he's trying to keep between them.

So, they're at an *impasse*.

Instead of spending her free time with him on training outings or hikes, Alina opts to explore on her own. Deeper into the forests she goes, drawing her own maps of the area for entertainment, making note of coves and springs that she finds along the way. Any unique landmarks get drawn in delicious detail, such as long abandoned shrines and cottages that she finds in the darker places of the woods.

It takes her mind off a lot of things.

One day, on her furthest trip yet, she finds an interesting cave side over a clear pool of water. It's the clearest pool she's ever seen, with small schools of fish swimming within. The bottom is completely visible, with underwater plants sprinkled here and there.

At the side, there's a large underwater tunnel, but it's bright inside, so Alina imagines that wherever it leads is just on the otherwise of the cave wall. Her adventurous spirit is intrigued, so she strips down to her undershirt and neatly folds it beside her backpack, along with her boots. The water isn't freezing and it feels pleasant on such a warm summer day, so she dives in, surfacing for a brief moment to get her bearing.

She dips under to examine the strange tunnel, noting that it seems to be a ten-foot swim to reach the sunlight section, oh so bright at the end. *A hidden sunlit cavern,* she thinks with excitement. Surfacing once more, Alina takes in a deep breath and ducks inside, swimming forward easily, finding the upward angle.

It's a little longer than she imagined, but she still has enough air when she surfaces, just on the other side, sunlight pouring down from above. Inhaling wetly, Alina looks at her surroundings with awe. It's a cavern, full of *sunstones*.

"*Wow,"* she utters aloud, her voice echoing back at her. There's no other entrance to it, aside from above or below. The hidden cavern has an open ceiling, sunlight sprinkling in through the vines and greenery growing above. The water sparkles like a precious stone along the walls, where sunstones peak out from the rock and stone. It's all lovely, beautiful. Serene. The only sound Alina can hear is that of the water droplets, birds, and the wind above.

Leaving the calm pool of water, Alina stands up on the cavern ground and looks around.

*It's so peaceful here,* she finds herself thinking as she sits on the large stone in the center, where the sunlight shines down directly. It's a warm stone, soothing, and Alina sits on it crossed legged, closing her eyes, enjoying serenity.

The sound of the water droplets in the background is hypnotic and Alina allows her mind to drift, like a leaf in the wind. Focusing on her breathing and the sound of nature, drifting, feeling nature, feeling the sun…

She almost doesn't realize that she's summoned a gigantic, bright ball of sunlight, swirling above her like a quiet storm.

It isn't until she opens her eyes and sees it, filling all the corners of the open cavern, that she realizes that she actually tapped into her own power naturally, without forcing a single thing.

She gasps in shock and it disappears.

The shadows return and she stares and stares, contemplating what just happened.

*How did I…I wasn't even thinking about it…I can't even call that much on my own anymore, not without Aleksander, so how…*

It's a fascinating revelation, that somehow, almost unknowingly, she tapped into it herself, while completely at peace.

When she returns to her gear, back on the other side of the underwater tunnel, Alina puts a star on her map, because she'll know what it means, if it no one else does. She's going to

have to come back and practice, just to see how much more she can do.

Or…if it was a fluke.

She really hopes it wasn't, because if she can regain control before Aleksander calls for her… maybe she can tear the Fold down, once and for all.

By *herself.*

~*~

By the time she makes it home, most of the afternoon has passed. Just as she's about to open the door to the apartment, it opens for her and she's yanked inside like an insolent child. Alina yelps, trying to find purchase on something as a strong hand pulls her inside.

Ivan is looking down at her with a very strange expression on his face, something she can't quite place. She's not sure she's seen this look on him before. "What happened? Where did you go?"

Alina tries prying his hand off of her. Was he waiting for her to get home? Did he really scramble down the stairs to yank her inside, because he sensed her heartbeat approaching the doorway? What's going on with him? "I was in the forest, nothing unusual. Could you let go of me?"

His hand drops away from her. "I lost track of you," he says sternly, as if it's her fault. "I thought something had happened." He goes quiet, shutting his mouth sharply, eyes hard.

She brushes past him and continues up the stairs, glad that her hair has already dried, along with her clothes. "Nothing happened."

It's then that Alina notices that the apartment is absolutely pristine. Sparkling clean. He cleans and organizes when he's stressed and by the looks of it, he's been absolutely *frantic.*

If they weren't fighting, she would reach out a hand and comfort him. Unfortunately, they've been at odds and Alina doesn't feel quite so charitable.

"You went too far," he grits out. "*Where* were you?"

*Don't you tell that filthy bloodletter a damn thing,* a voice that sounds suspiciously like Mal's says in Alina's head. *He bows to the Darkling. Do you think he wants you to control all of your power again?*

Something churns in her stomach, but Alina pushes it down.

Instead of answering, she says, "Why does this bother you?! Fedyor left you on multiple missions and you didn't devolve into a nervous wreck." Alina is exasperated, simply at her wits end with him. It seems that even if he's against them having any sort of intimacy, he cannot overrule his instinctive urge to control her.

He simply cannot let go.

“That’s because I always know where you are,” he snaps. “You’ve never been far away from me for *years*. What am I supposed to think when you suddenly drop off my radar? I thought-” Ivan cuts himself off again, looking away from her suddenly, as if pained.

There are lines of vulnerability in the undertone of his words. Alina realizes with sudden clarity that he thought one of a few things; that she’d run away, been killed, or had been kidnapped. It’s another realization that all three of those things terrify him, in regards to her.

Softening her tone, Alina says, “I didn’t go out of my way to worry you.” She’s well aware of the fact that he views her as utterly helpless, when in comparison to himself.

It’s another difference between herself and Fedyor; the other man was a heartrender- and quite skilled. Fedyor had been perfectly capable of protecting himself and others, where Alina…is more on the spectrum of a being a neutered dog; no longer capable of what she once was.

Which is frustrating.

Even with her full power, she was vulnerable to attack, being a small statured young woman. A skilled attacked could easily come up behind her and take advantage. Ivan’s overprotective of her, but that’s been his job for decades.

To expect him to completely drop it is probably asking too much.

Seeing under the harsh expression on his face, Alina sighs and finally bends her pride. “I’m sorry that I scared you. I’m not dead, for what it’s worth.”

“I can see that now,” he says dryly.

“The apartment looks lovely.”

“Thanks.” He couldn’t sound any less pleased.

Retreating to her room, Alina considers that he can’t sense where she is when she’s in the cavern that she discovered. It’s a unique piece of knowledge she files away for use, because Alina won’t discard a card like that from her hand.

He’s the Darkling’s right hand…and if she’s actually going to reclaim her power in full, she doesn’t exactly want him to *know*.

She trusts Ivan with her life, but she doesn’t trust him with knowledge that could set her free, once and for all.

In a rush of inspiration, and mainly because Viktor asked, Alina finds herself out at a few pubs after work. “I’ve never really done this bar hopping thing,” she confides in him by the time they reach the third bar.

His friends are the same mix of young women and men, so she’s in good company, always surrounded by smiles and laughter. Viktor laughs cheerfully, sipping his ale. “You need to get out more. You *deserve* to get out more.”

She gets the distinct impression that it’s a dig against Ivan, but she doesn’t bring it up. She’s had a few ales, completely avoiding anything strong like *kvas*. The hours spin away and by the fourth pub, there’s *dancing*.

Which is spectacular!

At first, she’s just excited to *watch*. It’s entertaining to see the more drunk couples stumble around on the dancefloor, groping each other blindly. However, one of Viktor’s friends offers his hand to her and Alina blushes, the ale hot in her blood. “I shouldn’t. I don’t really know-”

“No excuses!” He pulls her upward. “You’re too pretty to sit on the sidelines.”

Viktor spins by with one of his female friends, giving Alina a joking look at that says, *he’s ready to die, just go with it.*

So, go with it she does.

He’s not a great dancer, but neither is she. In fact, there’s no need to be, the way they’re dancing. She goes where he moves them, a little too tight in his arms, maybe too indecently pressed up against him, his breath hot and heavy on her ear, his hands gripping her body hard.

He’s cute enough and his smile is a little crooked, by that’s fine and he seems *rather interested* in her…

It feels nice, having male attention on her, being in someone’s arms, not having to worry about the repercussions. It’s simple and meaningless, she doesn’t even care if she forgets his name. Hell, she’s most definitely forgetting his name, all that matters is that he’s down to make her feel good and-

The world spins as Alina feels herself torn away from her dance partner, like she’s some sort of flower petal being ripped off a stem. There are some gasps of shock. *What the-*

Oh, Saints. It’s Ivan. Because, *of course it is*.

Her dance partner is yelling. “Hey asshole! She’s-”

A sharp right hook ends that argument very quickly and Alina gasps in mortification, hands coming up to her face in horror. There’s blood, oh, Saints, the poor guy is bleeding from his mouth. “Ivan! What are you doing?”

He doesn’t answer her, his face dark with anger as he takes her by the arm and pulls her out of the noisy pub. Out into the night they go, the loud sound of the drunk inhabitants behind

them, even as the door slams shut.

“Let go of me!” Alina hisses, taking a swing at him with an open palm.

Annoyingly, he catches her wrist with his other hand, pulling her off the path, heading back towards their apartment. When she kicks at him, he snarls, “Will you behave? You’re acting like a spoiled child.”

She tries digging her heels into the dirt, because he cannot just interrupt her life like this. It’s rude and irritating and overbearing and *ugh*.

“Have you completely lost your mind?! You can’t just storm in and drag me out like that, in front of *everyone*.”

“Actually, I can,” he says harshly. “I just did.”

He’s got that stupid, jealous look in his eye again and it makes Alina want to screech into the abyss until her brain explodes.

Instead, she opts for laughing bitterly. “I thought I didn’t belong to you, Ivan. Or, is that only when it suits you? Is that it, you jealous bastard? You don’t want me, but no one else can either?”

“I never said I didn’t want you,” he snaps back at her, his voice like a winter storm.

“Didn’t you? You can’t have it both ways,” she hisses, trying to pull away from him. “You can’t choose to push me away and expect to keep me at the same time. *Life doesn’t work that way!*”

“Lower your voice,” he snaps. “Or do you want everyone in town to know our dirty laundry?”

Oh, it’s *ours* again.

Finally breaking free of him, Alina turns back down the dark alley, making for the pub again, saying, “I really don’t care. I’m going back to enjoy myself with *whoever* catches my fancy; I’m not your prisoner.”

She barely even makes it three steps before Alina finds herself pinned up against a brick wall, Ivan’s body blocking her in. Snarling, Alina presses the palms of her hand on his chest, trying to shove him away, feeling the fast beat of his heart.

He doesn’t budge, his body as strong as the wall at her back. He’s looking down at her with a sneer on his mouth, eyes dark like obsidian. Before Alina can get another word in, he reaches down and cups her in the last place she could have imagined he would, sending fire straight into her heart, like the injection of a drug.

“Is this what you want?” He hisses in her ear roughly, grinding the heel of his palm against her core, causing Alina to gasp and rise up onto her tiptoes. A wave of need mixes with her anger, coiling deep in her belly. “Just someone to get you off when the urge strikes?”

Her mind is spinning at the aggressive, intimate touch- coming from *him*. It's amazing, how every nerve in her body comes alive in a rush of euphoria, singing for him, pleased that it's *him* touching her, he's choosing to *touch her intimately* and, *oh*-

She can feel the solid weight of him pressed against her belly and the feel of his obvious arousal makes her moan embarrassingly. She doesn't even care what he's so crudely insinuated about her; she just wants him.

"It can be more than that," Alina replies, feeling heat growing inside of her, coiled around the hot outrage and the dark tinged lust. She shifts her hips, trying to rub herself against his hand, enjoying the friction. "All you have to do is say *yes*."

His hand moves harder against her, making her buck against him eagerly. He chuckles unkindly, and even that arouses her, when it shouldn't. "Is that all it takes?" He says nastily. "All the fight goes out of you if I just rub your cu-"

Whatever rudeness he was about to say gets completely stuck in his throat when Alina reaches a hand between them and grasps his hard member, feeling the shape of him in her palm with delight. Instead of talking, he groans so loud that she's certain anyone passing by on the main road could have heard.

It only lasts a few seconds, because he removes her hand forcefully, refusing to allow her to caress him.

"Don't you want me to touch you?" Alina asks in disbelief. The alcohol is making her tongue loose. "*I* want to touch you."

He grits his teeth, trying to contain another moan as his self-control seems to come unraveled at her words. Roughly, he grips her waist and hoists her leg up to his hip, slotting her center directly around the bulge between his legs. Alina gasps, torn between shock and delight at the feel of his heated manhood pressing against her.

*That's…that's much better.*

Oh, she's missed feeling him! Only, she's never had his manhood between her legs quite like this, only separated by a thin amount of clothing. When he begins to slowly rut against her, Alina feels herself grow wet with need. Heat flashes hard and fast inside of her, twisting her up inside and setting her alight.

His face is buried in her shoulder, focused on chasing his pleasure with a surprisingly one-track mind. His hips move roughly against hers in a mimicry of what it would be like with nothing between them.

The way he roughly presses up against her, as if he can shove himself inside her, even with their clothes in the way. The hard grip of his fingers, digging into her hips, holding her in place for him to thrust against. Alina doesn't think she could stop him from having this, even if she were so inclined.

The brick digs into her spine and really, she doesn't give a hoot, because she's just over the moon that he's touching her in this manner, taking something for himself. She relaxes her hips and legs, making it easier for him to use her the way he wants.

…and it feels *delightful*.

Alina's along for the ride as he roughly rocks against her. Her arms wrap around his strong shoulders, hanging on to him, her mouth to his ear so he can hear every sound she makes, something that clearly excites him.

He likes listening to her, she realizes rather fast. Perhaps just as much as she likes the sound of his bitten off growls and his deep grunts of pleasure. It's fast and rough, dirty, because they're in an alley and Alina doesn't even care. She digs her nails into the nape of his neck, feeling her core swell and ache, wanting him inside.

Her bundle of nerves just above is practically purring in enjoyment from the way their hips rock together, and it's over far too soon as Alina feels her empty channel clench hard around nothing as she reaches climax with a soft whine of desire.

The sound of her orgasm triggers his and Alina feels him pulse against her sensitive center, moaning her name, and it's a fact that's deeply arousing all on its own.

For a moment, they remain pressed together, their breathing in sync, racing madly. It's then that Alina realizes their hearts are synced as well, that he'd pulled them together at some point during their wild fumbling against one another.

He's sucking roughly on her neck, *oh yes*, and Alina wants to know why they aren't in bed right at this very minute. Because what the *hell*.

"That could have been better," Alina says when she can finally speak normal words, sliding her leg off his hip. "If we were in my bed, with no clothes-"

He steps away from her sharply and Alina finds that very irritating. Saints, he better not be regaining his common sense again, with all the blood finally leaving his dick, returning to his actual brain.

"Don't start the whining," Ivan drawls thickly, voice hoarse. He passes a hand over his face, as if scolding himself. "This *isn't* happening again. Now, follow me home."

"Oh, is this another one of your mistakes?" Alina sounds disbelieving. "Who is going to know, Ivan? How is *he* going to know?"

He flinches at her words. "Because I'll know. Come on. Let's go."

*Frustrating man*, she thinks, staring at his back. *Frustrating man and his frustrating loyalty!*

If he bloody thinks he's walking away from this unscathed, he's got another thing coming. Besides...not happening again? Alina could almost snort with laughter. If that's really what he thinks...he's going to be disappointed.

~*~

The tension is thick between them as they enter their apartment, heavy with awareness and a certain hunger that hasn't quite been satisfied. If anything, Alina is certain she feels *hungrier* for him than she did before.

They've paused in the stairway, breathing each other in. It's dark and the space feels too small for them both. They barely breathe, the tension between them like a string pulled taut. The way he's looking down at her has Alina feeling out of control, wanting to drag him to her room. Literally, she will drag him if she has to.

She wants to dig her nails in deep and claw into his soul until there are scars with her name on them. This desire inside of her is raw and vicious and it's screaming to have its way.

Here, in the darkness of their home, their breathing goes rough as they stand silently, eyeing each other like a pair of hungry wolves. A certain thirst in their gazes, a dark, forbidden craving inside of them, growing ever more powerful.

She wonders how thin his control is right now, because it already slipped once tonight. She wonders if she can break it. Can he be pushed?

"Come on," she demands, starting up a few more steps, pulling at his hand. Alina feels a surge of power jerk between them, her fingers on his amplifier. "Let's go."

He doesn't budge, feet unmoving. "Let's go where, exactly?"

*As if he doesn't know.*

"Don't play dumb, Ivan." Her voice dips softly as they reach the top landing. "I *know* you want to."

He growls in denial, pulling away from her, the stubborn bastard. "I have no idea what you're talking about." Ivan starts walking towards his room and Alina refuses to lie back and take this again. Nope. Not again.

This time she's going to take control of this situation.

Alina picks up the nearest object, which happens to be a slipper, and launches it at him, saying, "I followed you home, the *least* you can do is follow me to bed, you salty toad!"

Okay, that may have been childish, but *it's fine*.

The line of his spine stiffens and Ivan turns his head to look at her over his shoulder. "Did you just throw something at me?"

"Oh, I'll do more than that," Alina says, getting up in his space.

His knife wound sneer is shaping his lips now, dangerous and cruel, making her stomach tighten with need. "You're relentless. I already told you-"

“I want you to come back to bed. It’s harmless-”

In seconds, he’s caught her in his grasp again. Ivan’s strong hand is firmly wrapped up in her dark tresses and he pulls, a quick, assertive yank that has Alina questioning if her body is aroused or angered by the act.

Why does what she feel for him always have to be so confusing?

Ivan’s mouth is by her ear as he leans down over her. “It’s not harmless, because *I want to fuck you*. I don’t think you’re ready for the repercussions of that fact. I don’t think you know what it *means*.”

The words hit like lead in her belly, but the kind that makes her core feel heavy and full of raw need. “Is that supposed to scare me?” She refuses to be cowed by his intimidation, by his crude words meant to shock her. “What if I’ve already chosen you?”

It appears these aren’t the words he wants to hear, because he grits his teeth. “You *can’t choose me*-”

“Don’t tell me what I *can’t*. Stop denying yourself and stop denying me. Not because of *him*.”

Ivan curses under his breath, his expression torn.

He’s aroused again and when she realizes it, feeling his swollen sex pressed against her, Alina’s breathing goes shallow. Ivan goes still, eyes dark. His jaw is still clenched despite his body clearly being ready for her. His mind is rebelling and Alina just can’t, for the life of her, figure out what she needs to do to weaken him.

*Fedyor was a lot sweeter than you and maybe that’s what he likes,* she finds herself contemplating. *Maybe that’s how you win*.

Saints, it’s going to kill her to show some vulnerability here, but she’ll do it if it garners a result. Gently, she presses her cheek to his chest in a show of submission, something she doesn’t really feel, but she can fake it till she makes it, whispering, “Please. I miss sleeping next to you. We don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

The tense lines of his body seem to relax and his arms come around her, holding her to him. Alina sighs in relief. It feels like all the tension in his body has snapped, drifting away like rainwater.

…and that was magic.

Except. “Not tonight,” he rasps. “I can’t. *I really can’t*. I don’t trust myself.”

“Why?” She sounds so sad and she wants to shake herself for sounding that way. She’s not weak, she’s *not*, she’s just disappointed.

“My control is thin right now," he says so softly that she almost doesn’t think she heard him right. "...I’m afraid of hurting you,”

Is that what's stopping him right now? That he might be rough? Saints, Alina ought to strangle him. "You won't hurt me. Ivan-"

He lets go of her, pushing her towards her bedroom, "You don't know that. I'm used to being with someone much stronger than you-"

*Ugh*. "Saints! Fine! Goodnight!" Alina scoffs at him and walks into her bedroom, where she doesn't expect much sleep will actually occur.

But she will be alone, so there's that.

Annoyingly.

~*~

She can't sleep, so she imagines he can't either. Alina paces a bit, feeling like her heart is trying to run laps around town. Her blood is running hot and she simply cannot focus on passing out for the night, not after the events from earlier.

*It's sheer stupidity*, she thinks as soon as she sits down in her sheets, scowling at the ceiling. They could be doing whatever the heck they want right about now, together, but he-

The door opens and Alina finds her gaze drifting to her late-night visitor in shock. Her mouth opens a bit. "Well, excuse you. What if I'd been sleeping?"

"You weren't," he replies, striding towards her bed with serious intent. Within seconds, he's leaning over her, his hand tangled in her hair again in that demanding way. "You win," he growls.

Oh, she likes it when he pulls her hair. Saints, why does she enjoy it when he's rough with her? "I…I do? What exactly-"

His mouth crashes down upon hers, like a raging fire, an uncontrollable storm. Whatever question Alina was going to ask dies on her tongue and she allows herself to being overcome by his need, feeling her heart nearly burst from joy.

*Finally.*

The world burns away into nothing, her existence becoming simply him, his body, the feeling of his heart pressed against her palm. Her mouth, soft and supple under his as he takes control of their kiss, his tongue tasting hers.

He groans into her mouth and Alina drinks the sound in, as if she can suck it into her lungs and make it hers.

"Ivan," she breathes softly, her body going pliable, her fingers reaching up to feel his scalp and the nape of his neck. "What-"

"I dream of this. With you. Of you under me." He covers her with his body, his sex hard and heated against her belly, making her gasp. "*Only me*. I've tried not to, but I just *can't*."

As if her aching core needed any other reason to become wildly ready for his body, Alina feels herself flash with heat, trying to rub herself against him again, craving release once more. She's only in her underwear and a simple shirt and she needs him to undress very soon.

"You can have me. Whatever you want," she replies, arching against him, needing *more*. This maddening man who has been such a thorn in her side for years and years, now being the one she craves more than anything else. Though, he's no less frustrating than the day she met him.

She grabs one of his hands with great impatience and presses it against her breast, wanting him to manhandle her, her nipple pressing into his palm. He groans and squeezes gently, feeling her, brushing his thumb over her erect nipple. Spurred by the sensitive way she reacts, he pushes up her shirt without much ado and closes him mouth over her before she has even a minute to feel anxious about what he thinks of her body.

His mouth is hot and wet and the way his tongue roughly brushes over her sensitive bud has her crying out, nearly begging him. "Please don't make me wait anymore," she utters, humping against one of his legs. "I need you."

He torments her for another minute or so, nibbling her soft mounds back and forth, enjoying the way it reduces her to a panting mess underneath him. When he finally sits back to strip off his clothes, it gives Alina a chance to squirm self-consciously out of her own.

Because what if he doesn't like her body? She's always been a bit of a tiny thing-

Before she can even formulate more reasons to be ashamed of herself, he's covering her again, roughly pressing her into the sheets, his impressive erection leaking on her belly. "Are you sure you want this? With me?" He sounds insecure and that's a surprise all on its own.

She uses her hand to feel the shape of him, enjoying the way he gasps sharply, twitching eagerly against her palm. "I've chosen this and no one is taking that away from me," she whispers, pressing her mouth to his jugular. "Not even you, Grumpy Bear."

There's a smirk on his lips now and he tilts his mouth to her ear, saying, "Don't say I didn't warn you."

They don't start out angelic, with hearts and roses in the background. In fact, it's more a clash of teeth and nails against flesh. Desperate and greedy. An assertion of dominance that ends up making Alina melt inside as Ivan pins her down into the sheets. His aggressiveness both draws her in and makes her a little anxious.

She's never been with someone quite so bossy in bed, if one were to believe it.

Alina makes a few attempts to shift him onto his back, but he's having none of that. She's used to being on top whenever she pleases and this is quite a new deviation from her norm. She growls at him and all he does is press his mouth to hers, swallowing the sound with relish, their teeth clicking together.

“Still think you aren’t helpless?” His voice is rough in her ear as his fingers fill her with confidence. He grunts at the slickness he finds between her folds, pleased. “Saints, you’re tight. And so wet for me.”

She’s panting on her back, legs spread for him obscenely, having lost her battle trying to top him. Alina flicks her hips a bit, making sure he can see everything. “I think you like having me be helpless. I think that turns you on,” she teases breathlessly.

His teeth flash in the dark and she knows that she’s right.

As he prepares her, he strokes his member, spreading his own slickness on it until it’s glistening with precum.

“Any day now,” Alina demands, her spine tingling with need, sparks of awareness and desire roaring through her body like wildfire. She needs him in her *now* before she *dies*.

“So impatient,” he growls at her, even as he slips his fingers from her body, dragging his wet fingers down her quivering thigh.

He places a hand on each of her thighs, keeping them spread wide as he lines himself up with her puffy entrance. Shifting his hips, Ivan fills her with one deep stroke that leaves her gasping, her lower body muscles tightening hard at the sudden intrusion. He’s hot and hard inside of her soft sheath and for a moment she can’t believe he’s finally where she wants him, feeling every inch of him inside of her. Heat fills her, crawling up and down her spine as she tries to adjust to his size.

Because he’s sizeable and under the bulk of his powerful body, she suddenly feels very helpless indeed.

Her channel is flexing around him madly, trying to adjust, and she feels quite stretched and her brief anxiety makes her tense a bit. His body is shaking with restraint as he holds still, groaning under his breath. He wants to pound her into the mattress, she can tell, but he’s keeping himself back.

For a few minutes, he eases her by sucking on her neck in a place that makes her tingle, all while his fingers gently play with the pearl of nerves above where they’re connected. He must be able to feel when her inner muscles relax, maybe with his power, Alina can’t be sure, maybe he released her flexed muscles himself, but soon he’s thrusting deeply into her, stroking her insides deliciously.

“*Oh*,” she whispers, her arms going around his shoulders, wanting to hold him. His chest rumbles with male satisfaction.

She feels a certain interesting crawl of heat up and down her body, as if he’s playing with her blood flow, as if he’s sending more blood down south, sending her to greater heights of sensitivity and pleasure. She arches up towards him, eagerly moving her hips against his, spurring his excitement.

The more excited he becomes, the more powerful his thrusts are as he angles her hips just so, allowing him to penetrate deeper. His grunts of pleasure fill her ears and Alina never wants to stop.

Soon, their flesh is slapping together audibly and the headboard bangs hard against the wall.

More than once, she has to whisper in his ear, "easy, easy *please*", her nails digging into his spine, drawing blood as she tries to remind him to be gentler when he holds her too tight. His grip on her thighs and hips will ease slightly, even if his hips still carry a rhythm that fills her in deep, strong strokes.

"Is this better?" His tone is like dark cinnamon chocolate, curling around her.

She nods against his neck, lifting her hips to his fluidly.

"You feel so breakable," he rasps, feeling how small she is in his arms, how delicate she is under the strength of his hands. She finally understands what he was so worried about; she *is* more fragile than Fedyor and Ivan's clearly used to being rough in bed.

He presses her hand between them and sparks of need fly through her, pleasure spilling outward from her bundle of sensitive nerves.

The way he's got her practically bent in half has her feeling a bit like a naughty slag, but the way he moans and the way her insides flutter around him in unexpected delight tells her that she really doesn't care. In fact, she may just like how filthy he makes her feel, like using her this way spirals him out of his perfect control.

She wants him to come undone.

Alina wonders how much of his power is flowing through her, easing their coupling for her, because it's been a while, he's rough, and he's thick enough that she feels spread tight around him.

Everything feels like being consumed. As if every sensation is too much, liquid heat boiling and building like a fire between her thighs. She feels like a mess, the place where they're connected loud and obscene. She feels like she's going to combust.

"Are…*ah*…*oh, there*…you making me feel this way? With your power?" She has to know, because no man can feel this good without some damn help.

He groans deeply as she flexes around him, his teeth playfully biting at her throat, making her keen with delight. "Does it feel good?" He sounds smug, as if he knows the answer.

Alina closes her mouth, because if he's going to be smug-

Sensing that about her, he tilts her hips at a sharp angle and sits back a bit, aiming his deep thrusts just so, his thumb pressing hard on her swollen clit. Alina can't keep in the sound that tears from her throat, her eyes fluttering shut. Oh, *oh*, she really likes when he does that…

"Well?" He asks slyly, hips going completely still, his chest heaving.

The rat bastard, she's going to murder him when he's done pounding her into oblivion. "Yes." She jiggles her hips, trying to make him move again, to make him do something. "Come on, move…yes…yes it feels good…you *horrid* ass of a man." She finishes that with a bit of an embarrassing moan as he slams back into her, making her eyes flutter shut.

He's going deep, almost too deep into her and she embraces the ache.

Ivan's deft fingers return to playing within her slit, briefly touching the place where they're connected intimately, where her lips are stretched tight around his firm length. They both groan throatily at the sensation and he's leaning back enough so he can watch himself disappear into her, making her his.

"You're soaked," he teases her.

"Thank the Saints," she grunts out in reply after he makes the headboard thud against the wall again. "I'm not sure I'd survive otherwise."

He leans down to taste her lips and she can feel the smirk on his mouth as he does so. His tongue strokes against hers in the same rhythm as his hips rocking into her. It's sensual and hot, feeling like he's filling her in two different places, leaving Alina gasping, feeling like she's spinning out of control, feeling lost to lust and need.

When she finally falls off the edge of oblivion, it's so sudden that she goes taut, clamping down on him with a surprised cry. He's smirking smugly against her neck, whispering 'good girl' and he's never called her a good girl in his damn life. Alina would dig her claws into his shoulders much deeper if she didn't suspect he'd enjoy it.

He gives her a moment to catch her breath, his hips still, nibbling at her mouth, occasionally biting a little too hard. He's still rock solid inside of her and when Alina feels a sudden rush of blood surge into her clit again, causing a strange amount of pleasure to run up and down her spine like lightning, she realizes what he's doing.

Ivan's definitely using his heartrending. She suspects, anyway.

"I can't- *not again*- Ivan! Too soon," and yet, she feels the coil of desire growing ever tighter within, her hips going fluid with hunger, rolling against him once more. *Oh*, the need is going to drive her to insanity.

Ivan's getting bigger inside of her, swelling with arousal. He must be at the edge of his own climax, and the sound of his breathing going utterly rough and ragged makes her head spin with hunger and excitement. "Don't make me laugh," he says crudely, slamming into her hard enough to shake the bed. "I can make you cum as many times as I want."

*Ah*. So, he is responsible for this out-of-control ache in her loins. Awful. *Glorious.* Delicious. **Bastard**!

Alina gasps hoarsely, feeling herself flooding for him already. He chuckles, feeling the way she arches against him eagerly once more, taking him deeper, the way her legs wrap around his back above his hips, crunching herself to get him as far inside as possible.

Oh, but he's going to kill her!

Only, it doesn't last more than three more erratic strokes, when he buries himself inside of her, holding her hips tightly to his as he moans her name, pulsing inside of her. The feeling of him filling her, the broken way he says her name, the sharp pull of his power, it sends Alina over the edge with him.

With a soft sound that makes her think of a large cat purring, Ivan rolls them onto their sides, his manhood slowly softening, slipping from inside of her wetly. Alina can feel a little embarrassed about that now, feeling a flush on her cheeks.

He rubs his nose against hers and Alina finds that ridiculously sweet after she got the whole fucking bear just a few moments ago. She smiles a little, hating that she suddenly feels a little shy. What does one say…after all that?

Because she's quite certain he belongs to her at this point and unless she displeased him, which she highly doubts, he's not going to avoid her bed ever again. He's not casual, he's never been casual, so now he's hers and that comes with some serious responsibility.

He had one bedmate for decades, something that was clearly attached to extremely strong emotion- love. Alina can't say the same for herself and it's a shocking acceptance for her to understand that this is something very, very serious for him.

Her heart flutters at the thought, not even thinking of the repercussions.

"Did I hurt you?" His voice is husky from sex and use.

"Ah. N-no, I don't think so." Holy saints, she is aching! *ACHING*.

Ivan sighs. "Don't lie, you know you can't lie to me."

"Well, I'm not hurt. I am a little sore. It's not your fault."

He frowns, because *yes, it is his fault*, so she quickly adds on, "It's not a bad sore! I'm fine, I liked it. I'll probably be feeling you tomorrow, but that's okay."

"You sure?" He presses a warm hand to her belly, soothing her tight, formerly unused inner muscles with his heartrending. It's a soft, sweet action, making her heart clench a little, feeling butterflies in her stomach. Even with all the achiness.

Gently, she places her hand over his. "I'm sure. We'll figure it out. First times are always funny like that. Besides, you're used to being with a man…and I'm not a man."

He snorts at that. "Really? Did the fact that you don't have a dick give that away? Or was it something else?"

Alina laughs at him. "Smartass." Then. "Can you carry me to the bathroom? I need to…do lady things."

“What hell, *Alina*, it’s bad enough that you need to be carried?” He sounds a little distraught instead of angry.

She lifts her arms like limp noodles and playfully sings out, “*Carry me*.”

He groans, but does as she asks, setting her down and leaving her to clean up and do whatever business she needs to. The place between her thighs feels sore and used, her abdomen feeling full and achy, but there’s no sharp pain or any blood, so she marks it down as normal aches and pain from having a rather…enthusiastic, well-endowed partner.

After she cleans up, she manages to make it back to bed herself, curling up in the sheets beside him, inhaling the scent of his skin. Ivan pulls her closer, running his hands over her thighs, feeling her hips, learning the shape of her body with a certain calm he didn’t have earlier.

Alina feels soft and sleepy, satisfied for the first time in a very long time. She drifts close to sleep until-

“Were you really going to…find someone else? In the pub?” He sounds strangely unsure, his palm drifting over her body.

Alina’s eyes pop open. Of all the questions to ask! She’s glad he can’t see the expression on her face right now, because *really*.

She can’t lie either, damn heartrender.

“I don’t think I have an answer that you want to hear,” she breathes against his throat. “So, I’m not going to answer.”

“Alina…” he sounds a little waspish and she’s not surprised.

“It annoys me that I can’t just send you off to sleep with a flick of my hand to avoid conversation, the way you do to me,” she says tiredly. She runs her fingers across the scruff on his jawline, feeling the stubble there. “You’re in my bed now, so you’re mine. Don’t worry.”

“Isn’t it the other way around?”

“Nope. Go to sleep.”

“I’m pretty sure you belong to me now, you can’t even walk by yourself,” he retorts heatedly.

Alina snorts, saying, “Whatever floats your boat. *Go to sleep!”*

Thankfully, that appeases him, because he huffs and holds her closer. Good, because she was going to suffocate him with a pillow otherwise.

---

She learns a few things that weekend, in the aftermath of their relationship changing in such a drastic manner.

First- he's *very* creative.

Second- she's also *very* flexible.

As a result, they spend the weekend in bed, learning each other's bodies, teaching each other what they like. It's like meeting for the first time, full of excitement and mistakes. And some bickering.

*{"Are you complaining again, woman?"*

*"I'm not complaining, but I do feel like I've been mauled by a tiger." The feeling between her thighs is always her biggest reminder, the slow ache in her lower abdomen. She sort of looks like she fought a wild animal and lost. They both do. With teeth marks, love bites, blatant for all to see.}*

They don't spend much of the time sleeping, but when they do, she enjoys the weight of his hand on her belly, the way he eases the sore muscles inside of her, his nose buried in the nape of her neck. The soft feeling of his breath in her hair.

He may be a brute, but he's also protective, the way he's always been. Alina likes that he's exactly who he is, in and out of the bedroom. It keeps things simplistic.

Ivan's quite authentic that way and it's *refreshing*.

When she finally gets out of her apartment of Depravity & Sin on Monday morning, Alina hears Miss Katja call out to her from outside her shop. The shop owner is misting a few of her flower displays, preparing them for customers. The elderly woman laughs when she sees Alina. "You're on two feet again, lass! Think you're pregnant by now, hmmm?"

Alina blinks and turns slightly flushed, heat creeping over her face. "P-pregnant?!"

Cackling with her rough witchy tone, Katja examines her tulips with a wizened hand. "Wasn't that the goal with all that headboard banging racket you two made all weekend? *No*? Oh, you best come inside for some tea, sweets."

Alina almost dies from mortification. She remains rooted in place. "You heard us?!" Alina sounds rightly appalled.

"I'm ancient, not dead. Here, I still sell some pennyroyal, you need to stock up on that if you two are planning more marathons. Any special occasions this past weekend? *Ah*, big anniversary. Men always get spiced up for random reasons." Her hazy old eyes look Alina up and down critically. "You're such a tiny thing and he's got the stamina of a bull. You poor dear. Hurry up, come inside."

If Alina could die of embarrassment, she would choose to do it immediately.

*Immediately.*

---

---

When they get back to hand-to-hand combat training, things are far more difficult than they originally were. Sure, they're able to get their way through a few practice scuffles, with Ivan teaching Alina more defensive tactics to guard herself with, but by the end, both of them are breathing hard and not always because they're tired.

Because they *aren't* tired and the more aggressive Alina gets with Ivan, the more his pupils dilate with hunger. She can always tell when he's already thinking of getting between her thighs, wanting her clawing his back open.

Today, she has an embarrassing muscle spasm in her thigh that completely takes her out in the middle of a spar. They'd been jogging around earlier, so she's not certain if that had anything to do with it. Or, all her muscles are getting taxed from overuse.

Could be that, too.

While she's on the ground, trying to ease the sudden spasm, Ivan kneels down next to her, trying to help her stretch it out. She feels a flicker of his heartrending pass over the muscle, trying to make it quickly complete the spasms, which in turn makes it hurt worse for a slight moment.

When it stops, she tests flexing the leg, out and then to her chest as she lies on her back in the grass. When she pulls her knee to her chest, Ivan holds it there, keeping the stretch going.

He gives her a sly look. "Your heart is racing again. Is this hurting you?"

Alina stares off at nothing in the sky, because he knows what he's doing and she is not entertaining him.

"Um. I'm totally fine," she utters, feeling her face heat. "I think it's okay now."

His eyes crawl down to the apex of her thighs as he asks, "Are you sure?"

If inappropriately exposing her crotch to him is-

"You slobbering dog, wait till we get home," Alina snaps with a blush on her cheeks, kicking at him.

He *laughs*.

---

---

They still attempt sleeping in separate rooms, every once in a while. It's as if the separation will hide what they do in the dark. It doesn't really work. Not that Alina thought it would, but she lets Ivan do what he needs to do to make him feel better about the situation. She knows the Darkling is still hanging over his head, even if there's no guarantee that Aleksander is going to request her at his side any time soon. It could be *years*.

So, Ivan always comes crawling back to her bed.

Like this night, when Alina feels herself coming awake, slow and sleepy to the feeling of him sliding into bed with her, nuzzling her, whispering her name. Alina's heartrate speeds up and Ivan groans in excitement at the sound of her reaction to him joining her.

He's hard as rock already and Alina whispers, "…Ivan, I was sleeping…"

"So, sleep," he drawls, voice heavy in the inky darkness of the room.

Ivan slides further down the bed and lifts up her nightgown, exposing her rear to his hungry gaze. He leans down and tilts her hips at a certain angle, licking a bold stripe between her legs, front to back, *all the way back*.

Alina moans in surprise, because it feels rather dirty and taboo, and oh, *why* are her hips automatically presenting to him in this embarrassing fashion, as if begging for more?

He obliges her very clear body language and digs in with a growl, all tongue and precarious nips with his teeth that have her squealing.

By the time he fills her with his cock, she's flooded and ready for him.

She doesn't sleep. At least, not until he's done.

---

---

She finds that Ivan isn't remotely interested in letting her dominate him in bed, though he's happy to let her fight for it, her nails sinking painfully deep into his shoulders, her growls in his ear as she tries to get him on his back. It's rough and raw, but somehow rewarding when he proves he's still physically the strongest between the two of them.

In fact, it's a massive contrast to her relationship with the Darkling, who was more than happy to prostrate himself on his back, allowing her *whatever she wanted*. While Aleksander got a special joy in making her ride him, Ivan prefers her solidly on her back or belly. Or twisted up like an interesting pretzel. *Whatever*. As long as he's on top.

She finds that she *likes it*.

The weight of him, pinning her down, the strong grip of his hands. The rough way he is, possibly because he's used to being with a man and doesn't feel the need to hold back. He makes her feel weak and small, like maybe she isn't even herself anymore.

The way he nearly folds her in half, slamming his thick manhood into her at just the right angle to make her forget her damn name. It's a mix of pleasure and pain and Alina finds herself wanting more.

They certainly aren't perfect, the way stories and myths always proclaim. There are no flowers and sweet romantic whispers between the sheets. In fact, it's a clash of teeth and nails against flesh. An assertion of dominance that ends up making Alina melt inside against her better judgement whenever Ivan successfully pins her down.

Not that he has to try that hard; her physical strength is nothing in comparison to his.

Regardless, she likes seeing her marks on his body as much as he enjoys seeing his on her.

Vaguely, she gets the impression that Ivan enjoys asserting his masculinity over her. Not that she can entirely blame him, he's got a lot to be smug about in that department. Regardless, it's still an adjustment, a mental shift that Alina isn't used to.

As the weeks turn to months, she does get used to it, because she *enjoys* it. It's easy, it's simple, and if she rules the household, he rules in the bedroom.

Which works out just fine in Alina's opinion.

And, eventually, they stop keeping up the pretense of sleeping in separate rooms. It's just stupidity, because one way or another, they end up in the same bed, sweating, struggling with each other, teeth snapping and hips joined. Bodies straining against one another in a rhythm as old as time.

---

---

Regardless of the dynamic shift in their relationship, Alina still keeps something for herself.

She's kept her cavern secret, the one filled with sparkling sunstones, not wanting Ivan to know that she's beginning to find more control as the months crawl by. There's something… something inside of her that tells her to keep that knowledge close. He still gets antsy when he can't hear her heart, for the afternoons she goes on these adventures, but Alina has found ways of brushing it off, she's found ways of apologizing.

Actually, the apologizing is easy, because he is utterly distracted by sex whenever it presents itself to him. If he's figured out the correlation of her going missing for a few hours and her dropping to her knees in front of him when he's ripping into her over disappearing, he's not let on.

It feels like a lie, but how can it be one if it's simply omitted?

The fact makes her feel dirty; it's something that Aleksander would tell himself, she's certain. She's experienced enough of his 'omissions of truth' to last a lifetime. All his vague answers, his carefully crafted replies. Never once did Aleks feel terrible for telling her only a partial truth.

Sometimes, she wonders if he would have ever told her he was the Black Heretic, if Baghra hadn't told her. Perhaps he would have gone on pretending he was void of blame and guilt, for years and years, at least until his eternal status became clear.

Regardless, if omission is a lie, this slow yet steady reclaiming of her power is her one big lie to Ivan.

It's a lie that could one day save the world, so it's a lie Alina will keep.

Because the Fold must come down, one way or another, and no matter how long she's able to live freely, she knows the Fold is waiting for her, somewhere in the distance, swirling with darkness and hate.

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** Comments and kudos are loved!!

OMG. I am so sorry, what is this seriously raunchy chapter I just slapped you all with?? Gosh, sorry if it's total garbage T.T

# Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next few years don't pass with any particular speed or slowness. Time slips by, fluid, like a river of life and living and consciousness. It's strange, how domestic it begins to feel. It's *strange*, mainly because Alina never thought she would ever have something like this to herself.

She certainly never thought it would be with *him*.

Then again, if there hadn't been a war, if there had never been the Darkling, Ivan and Fedyor would have been retired off in some cabin in some dark forest, living happily until death parted them. So, in retrospect, Alina shouldn't be wholly surprised by this; Ivan's the settling down sort. He *likes* being settled with one person.

Frankly, she finds it sweet, because that's how Fedyor was. That's why, *somehow*, those two managed to work out so well, even when Alina couldn't understand it and loathed Ivan with every fiber of her being.

Life turns out so domestic, so completely normal that Alina can almost forget what their past was.

She can *almost* forget what sort of future awaits.

Alina's reminded whenever she uses her quickly growing power; a reminder of what she must someday do. Of what she intends to destroy. It's still her best kept secret; and she intends to keep it that way.

---

---

It's a hot summer weekend, just like any other.

Ivan comes into the house with a scowl on his stern face, giving off his utterly annoyed and irritated aura that usually sends most people running away. "What's wrong with you?" Alina asks curiously, running her eyes over his expression with amusement.

She thinks it's funny when he's put out, actually.

Ivan passes a glance across the expression on her face and gives her a look that says she's the root of all his problems in life. Well. She probably *is*. "That crazy old bird downstairs just spent the last fifteen minutes reaming me out for still not marrying you."

“Oh my.” Alina changes the angle of her pencil, making her shading more dramatic. She’s been creating more advanced drawing lessons for her kids at the orphanage, now that many of them have developed real talent for the skill. Some of them are turning into spectacular artists. “You poor thing.”

“I put it on you. Said you told me no.”

Her pencil stops. *He did wha…?* “Why would I say ‘no’ when I’m the one who’s been asking you these past few years to make an honest woman of me?” That’s their story anyway, and it still makes Alina laugh. He can’t just change it up!

His lip curls. “Because, I said you wanted to keep your options open, in case you decided on someone else.”

“You filthy swine,” Alina complains, even though a smile is pulling at her mouth. She’s only slightly outraged at her supposed morals being questioned. “Now, I look like the whore and you look like the victim.”

“Aren’t I though?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Alina says lightly. “By the way, I had my *own* little chat with our beloved neighbor. Katja informed me that we woke her up again with…*ah*…well, you know. The *business*.”

‘The business’ is the polite way of putting it.

Ivan makes a disinterested noise. He walks over to where she’s sitting on the couch with her sketchpad. “And?”

She nudges him with her foot when he gets closer. He catches her ankle in his hands and she can feel a tickle of his power lightly run over her. “We *really* should move the bed off the wall.”

Ivan rolls his eyes, sitting down next to her, running his hand further up her leg. “Listening to us is the most action that old bird has had in years.”

He’s not wrong. “I feel like we’re being inconsiderate neighbors!”

“I’m not moving the bed off the wall.” Ivan takes the sketchpad from her hands and places it on their coffee table. All before leaning closer, mouth finding her neck.

“It’s so embarrassing.” Alina squirms, feeling her stomach flip.

“Get over it. Besides, isn’t it supposed to be flattering that everyone knows I can’t stay away from you?”

“When you put it that way…”

---

They still have their problems. Moments of incompatibility, based up on their own world views. Alina figures it's something that will never change; they're both very set in their ways. She can only assume that's the price one pays for living so long.

She comes from a place in the world where she was used to being on the very bottom. She was used to fearing the Grisha, disliking what they stood for, not liking how they placed themselves above the general public. Hell, she even hated knowing that the Grisha got bulletproof *kefta* while the First Army got nothing to protect them.

Ivan is the opposite of her in every way, when it comes to such matters.

He couldn't have been happier to be found as a Grisha, embracing his powering, reveling in how it made all non-Grisha and Grisha alike fear him. Power found him- and he *liked* it. His disdain for the First Army was well known, even if he himself had family once that had served in it.

It all comes down to the bottom of the matter, which has always been that Alina would rather help everyone, regardless of who they are…and Ivan would prefer to hang on to the 'us vs them' mentality that drives her to sheer irritation.

~*~

"I'll be pretty busy for the next few nights, so you might have to fend for yourself," Alina tells him evasively. The reasoning for it is one she imagines he will not be impressed with.

"Why is that?" His tone is neutral, his worse nature sitting under his skin, waiting to see how he wants to react, based upon her answer. Alina's learned that by now and it's wild that she can see these small aspects of him without really even looking too deep.

She finishes cleaning up the kitchen counters, putting away silverware. "There's a group of honorably discharged young men coming home in a few days from the First Army. The town council wants to hold a celebration for them. I'm helping with the planning, along with a few others that do volunteer work."

True to form, his dark eyes go even darker, superiority glittering there. "They're just *Otkazat'sya*."

The way he says it, so derisively, makes a very dark, ugly feeling rise up inside of Alina. The urge to lash out grows strong and she barely leashes it in.

"They are just as worthy as any Grisha. They bleed and die, just like you do. I happen to *like Otkazat'sya.*" An image of Mal flashes in her mind, his handsome grin and his good-natured strength. Her voice drops a little, a threat. "In case you've forgotten how I feel about the matter."

Ivan sneers, as if he's sensed where her mind has gone. "You don't like *Otkazat'sya* better than you like *me*."

Oh, he thinks his bedroom prowess makes up for other things, does he? The ancient, cruel feeling inside of her unfurls, like a snake uncoiling, sliding through her flesh. "*Hmm*. Don't I, though?" Is a soft, icy question, her eyes pinning him.

He looks caught off guard by the comment, and perhaps it's the way she said it, her tone, the look in her eye. "Speak plainly," he states.

The anger is still slithering through her and she doesn't want to speak plainly; she wants to be unpleasant and difficult. "Aren't I?" Her voice is airy and uncaring, an undertone of razorblades.

Ivan doesn't balk and he doesn't quail, because that's never been his personality. He's not one to back down and he never will be. It's why Aleksander chose him; it's why he'd been paired with her. "No. You're doing what you do to *him*. I'm *not* interested in playing word games with you."

This nearly makes Alina blink in surprise. It's rare to hear him bring up the Darkling in such a fashion, as more of a competitor than his admired leader. Regardless, she will not allow any of this to stand. If there is one thing she cannot abide, it's this attitude towards *Otkazat'sya.*

"Do not insult non-Grisha to me again," she says slowly, clearly enunciating every single word. "And you won't have to."

His jaw clenches.

"Is my meaning clear?" She presses, *demands*.

"Yes," Ivan says through gritted teeth.

*He should know better*, she thinks. There's always been things that are never to be spoken of in front of her, even at her time at the Little Palace. Talking down to non-Grisha has always been one of them.

~*~

This year, when the anniversary of Mal's execution comes, Alina finds herself out in her favorite field of tall, golden grass again. Only, this time, she draws his face, or what she remembers of it. It's been so many long years and it's her greatest fear that one day, she'll simply forget what he looked like entirely. That she'll forget the sound of his voice.

She'll always remember the way he was, the things he did, the way he made her feel. And yet, slowly, time is taking away small features from her, features that only appear in her dreams, and sometimes, not even then.

So, she draws, the daylight hours slipping by as she reimagines the way he looked when he laughed. It's a silent comfort, and though she knows she's probably messed a thing or two up,

it's still balm for her soul. There isn't grief, only a little ache in her chest to let her know what she's missing, what she'll miss forever.

"You were always so charming," she says softly to the empty air. "All the girls noticed you. It killed me that you never saw me the way I saw you. At least, not until I wasn't in your reach anymore. *Then* you noticed." Alina twirls her pencil, staring down at the face she's drawn. "I wonder if things could have been different, if you saw me for who I was earlier. Maybe we both could have lived normal, anonymous lives somewhere."

It's a foolish thought, but she likes to think on it, sometimes.

"I've been helping at an orphanage. You'd love it. I think, if it had just been you and I, we would have started our own, just to give back to those like us." She fixes some of the shading on her drawing. "I digress. I'm alone in this world and you're in the next." Alina pauses awkwardly on that note, nose wrinkling a little. She's talking with a dead man, but still, it gives her hesitancy to say her next words.

"Not entirely alone, I guess. *I have the General's bloodletter*," she mimics a deeper voice, from the way she remembers Mal sounding like. "You'd hate him. You definitely wouldn't approve. Not that you have any right to judge; I haven't forgotten about you getting down with Zoya, which is *totally* on you, by the way. So, I guess I don't really regret *this* at all. He's not perfect…but none of us are."

The wind blows, shifting her hair, small wafts of her vanilla perfume curling in her nose.

Alina sighs, staring off into the distance. "I still miss you. As hot-tempered and emotional as you could be, at least I always knew where your head was at. I always knew you were on my side." A wash of fondness floats through her, remembering some of his antics, even the ones that drove her crazy.

There's an odd pinging sensation in her chest and Alina turns her head to look back in the direction of the town. Ivan's wondering where she is.

*Let him brood,* she finds herself thinking, which is likely a cruel thought on her part, but he's overstepping, on today of all days.

He can't help it, she reasons. He's not oblivious and he knows who she's off thinking about all day. Part of her thinks he's being unreasonable; another part of her understands that it's just part of being human, that sometimes unreasonable feelings can't be stopped.

...and Ivan is often unreasonable. And jealous, even when he tries not to be.

She snorts, adding more detail to the mischievous glimmer in Mal's eye. "I can't begin to tell you how frustrating it is. This is literally the equivalent of him yanking on my hand, demanding, '*don't forget about me*,' as if that's even possible! *Men*." Alina pauses and makes a face, realizing she's disparaging men to a man. "Sorry. You were a bit of a twat yourself, though. I think we can both admit to that now, Malyen Oretsev." She grins.

The afternoon continues to pass peacefully, with Alina idly chatting to someone long past the mortal coil.

~*~

When she gets home later, humming under her breath, Alina takes her shoes off and climbs the stairs. The scent of the soup she put to slowly cook on the stove for most of the day is starting to smell heavenly and her mouth waters.

Ivan is sitting on their couch, reading some old battlefield tactics manual. Alina rolls her eyes and comes up behind him, dragging her nails lightly over the nape of his neck as she presses her lips to the top of his head in the ghost of a kiss. “Did you eat yet? Soup should be done.”

“I was waiting for you,” he replies, a little too flatly for Alina’s tastes.

Oho, he’s been brooding alright. *Definitely*. She feels a flash of irritation zip through her, because this is a day that he shouldn’t even be worrying himself about, it’s *her business*, it literally has no bearing on him and *his place* in her life. She settles on not babying him; there’s no reason to bring anything specific up.

Wrapping her arms around him from behind, her hands on his chest, she tilts her head and presses her mouth to his ear, saying, “I’m here now. I’ll get you a bowl.” She places a very loud kiss on his cheekbone and that is *all* the coddling he’s getting.

He joins her in the kitchen and he wisely tones down his sullenness.

“Reading old military books?” Alina asks wryly. “Do you miss being on the frontlines so much?”

Ivan chews and swallows his food. “There are parts I miss.”

“I would say I’m amazed that anyone could miss anything to do with war, but that would be a lie.” Alina leans back in her chair, assessing him. “You always enjoyed taking lives.”

“I don’t *enjoy* it. I’m good at it. There’s a difference.”

*Don’t say it, don’t say it…* “Well, I’ve seen you do some things that say otherwise, but I’ll take your word for it.” *Ah*, she shouldn’t have said that.

His eyes, the ones that can either be hot cocoa warm or ice storm cold, go empty, like a desolate wasteland. “Do you want to elaborate? Any specific memories you’d like to *comment on*?”

Alina’s seen him torture people. She’s seen him execute First Army deserters. Worse. Things that could make her skin crawl, if she chooses to dwell upon them, let alone bring voice to them. Alina looks away and sips her soup. “Oh, no. I think we’re good.”

He *knows* that she *knows* exactly what sort of things he’s done and that’s enough.

With a certain fluid ease, he accepts her answer, instead shifting to a different conversation entirely, the one that's probably been on his mind half the day. "What did you get up to all afternoon?"

*You already know,* Alina thinks, wanting to stab him with her spoon, very briefly. "Drawing in the out fields. Chatting with someone who isn't here anymore." If he asks her *what* she talked about to Mal, she's going to commit murder. "I live such a mysterious life, don't I?"

He must get the hint, because he looks away with a hint of guilty in his eye and thank the Saints because Alina did not want to pull some form of Fedyor card out of her pocket like a weapon. She could do it; she doesn't want to.

"You seem…fine. Today."

As opposed to the earlier years with the dramatics and the alcohol and all the crying? *Sure*. "That's because I am fine," Alina replies dryly. She'd be even better if he wasn't in a tiff for no reason.

She licks her spoon and freezes when she catches him watching her. Alina smoothly pretends to be unfazed by it.

Ivan says his next words quickly, as if trying to get them over with. "Did you want me to sleep in a different room tonight?" The tone of his voice says he doesn't want to.

Alina frankly doesn't care what he chooses to do; she's done what she wanted to do for Mal today and Ivan is being absurd. She plays the hand she learned from dealing with Aleksander; answer *everything* with another question, make the other person play their hand. "Did *you* want to sleep in *your* room?"

His eyes darken slightly. "My room *is* your room."

As always, he's very finicky about the '*ours'* stuff. Alina finds it enlightening and sometimes hard to deal with, because she still views things as 'hers' and 'his'. That's not something she wants to get into either. Standing up sharply, Alina cleans away the dishes, shrugging her shoulders slightly.

"Then, you already have your answer, don't you?" Her tone is smooth, soft like an ocean breeze.

When the time comes to go to bed, he follows her, close on her heels, closing the door behind them quietly.

---

---

They have their arguments. Their tiffs.

It never breaks or makes them. Alina thinks they're beyond such things, now that they've been together. In fact, arguments sometimes lead to the bedroom, which sometimes makes the argument itself disappear *entirely*.

It isn't always conflict, between them. There's simple companionship, the sort that changes and grows with time. There are days when they both don't really speak a word to each other, just as there are days that they spend the entire afternoon hiking and enjoying the outdoors if the weather allows.

There are days they don't mind having some separation; just as there are times when Ivan can't abide not knowing what she's up to and who she's been with. It's usually the worst when she goes off to 'hike' alone, when she's really off to go to her sunstone cave and practice her small science. It drives him mad when she drops off the map, leading to uncomfortable conversations at home, entailing stern questions like, *is there someone else?*

To which, Alina replies, *how could there be anyone else when I'm covered in hickeys from you? Covered, Ivan.* ***Covered.***

*I'm pretty sure a bruise hasn't stopped any man in history,* Ivan will hiss back.

…and around they go, until Alina finally soothes him and says, *you know there's only you.*

They don't often talk about current events that have anything to do with their former lives; that usually leads to ugly spats, because neither of them is willing to bend on their beliefs… and their beliefs oppose.

Otherwise, Alina likes to think she's a good companion. She can play at sweet, she can be sly, and she can easily play as dirty as he wants in the bedroom. The bedroom, where all their problems seem to get worked out. Solved…not so much, but sometimes forgotten.

It isn't all just the physical that glues them together.

Ivan takes care of her and her well-being. When she's sick, when she's sad, if she feels out of sorts and lost. He's there to soothe her, one way or another. Often, she doesn't even need to say a word and he knows *exactly* what she needs.

For a rock of a man, he's exceedingly perceptive.

She doesn't have to play games to get what she wants from him. At least, not really. He prefers her when she's blunt and honest and she likes when he gives her just a hint of his softer side. Alina doesn't see much of it, but when she does, *it's very nice*.

---

---

"I'm going."

“No,” he replies sternly. Ivan is leaning close to some project paperwork he’s focused on, barely giving her a glance.

“Yes. You can come with.”

He makes a sharp, nasty scoff. “I loathe being surrounded by witless idiots. I have better things to do.”

Work, he means. He’s doing *work*.

Alina laughs dryly. “I mean, they think I’m a witless idiot for being with you, because you’re such a massive dick-”

“Which is precisely why you’re with me,” he drawls. “It can’t be that hard for them to figure out.”

Oh, isn’t he just *so* funny? Scandalizing and vile, more like.

Placing her hands on her hips, Alina gives him a disagreeable look. “I am not just with you for what’s between your legs, you arrogant sod.”

He gives that razor thin smirk, still focused on what’s in front of him. “You admit that it *is* one of the reasons though.”

Alina flushes, because she can’t lie, at least not blatantly. “Well, *sure*. But the reality is, any cock can get the job done.”

Ivan finally puts down the project plan he’d been outlining for the South end construction, slowly craning his head in her direction, giving her a dark look. “*What* did you just say to me?”

Well, that certainly got his attention. Putting in the earrings that he bought her ages ago, Alina shrugs, saying, “I’m going out. Come with me. *Don’t*. It’s up to you how you torture yourself for the evening. Is it death by socializing? Or is it by sitting here, thinking about me pressed up against someone else on the dancefloor? Pick your poison and do it quick.”

He knows he can’t keep her from doing what she wants. Not without massively overstepping acceptable behavior.

If looks could kill, Alina would be dead a thousand times over. “Am I going to need to throat punch anyone tonight?”

Alina laughs. *Ah,* she wins. He’s going to come out with her. “I mean, I hope not…”

~*~

He behaves himself well enough, though he’s never actually friendly to Viktor and his friends. Ivan answers questions as shortly as he can, brooding mostly, but Viktor forces a few glasses of *kvas* in front of him, telling him to *loosen the fuck up, man.*

*Kvas* helps take the sharpest of edges off Ivan, once Alina finally convinces him to drink what's in front of him. He relaxes like some sort of fierce hawk, eyes scanning the people in the pub, always making sure he knows where Alina is and what she's getting herself into.

The night starts with her sitting next to him, chatting amicably with Viktor and a few of his female friends at the table. Eventually, the night grows late, more alcohol flowing through everyone's veins. It's by this point that Ivan allows Alina to dance with others, but only because he won't dance *at all*.

Plus, the younger men tend to behave when they know Ivan's watching them.

She laughs and has a good time as she's spun around between different partners, always making sure to never allow them to pull her too close, or allow them to place their hands anywhere Ivan wouldn't like. Most, by this point in time, respect the fact that Ivan's hers and that she has no intent of casting him aside.

And if they attempt to convince her otherwise, they're going to get *thrashed*.

Another hour spins by and Alina eventually drags herself off the dancefloor, settling herself directly in Ivan's lap, like some sort of little perched bird. There's sweat on the nape of her neck and she feels too warm, feels like her face is flushed from exertion.

"Did you have fun?" Ivan asks her, his eyes running over her possessively. His hands settle intimately about her waist.

"I did," she gushes, shifting in his lap, getting herself comfortable. "Thank you."

"I want to go home," he tells her quietly.

"Soon." Alina takes a big gulp from her pint. "Let me just finish this."

As she's drinking again, Ivan's hand casually cups the underside of her breast, not an ounce of shame in him, causing Alina to feel extremely aware of the public setting and-

Heat floods between Alina's thighs as his thumb drifts subtly over her peaked nipple, rubbing it in a way that make her belly tighten. Ivan repeats himself in her ear, voice heavy with something that isn't boredom. "I want to go home."

From the way he's touching her, to the flicker of his power inside of her, the words are truly a polite version of him saying, '*I've been a good boy, now I want my reward*.'

Meeting his gaze, Alina replies, "Alright. We'll go."

"Now?" The hand on her breast squeezes gently, causing her to squeak.

She nods, face red as she quickly finishes her drink. Casually trying to push his hand off of her, praying no one saw, Alina gives her quick goodbyes to the remainder of the group at the table. Mostly everyone is dancing or making out in some corner.

As they leave the pub, Ivan wraps his arm around her waist and pulls her flush against him as they start on their way home. “I thought I’d never get you out of there.”

He’s groping her and Alina laughs, “You’re *insatiable*.”

They barely make it through their front door, *definitely* not even up the stairs when he’s pressing her against the wall, his mouth hungrily on hers, cock hard against her belly. They kiss roughly, open-mouthed, passionate.

“I need you,” he growls as he kisses behind her ear. “After watching you dance with all of them. One after another. All of them wanting to bed you-”

Alina digs her nails into his scalp, the way he likes. “Oh, you’re *exaggerating*.”

His hand roughly buries itself in her hair and he presses her down on her knees, undoing his pants with his free hand, dilated eyes looking down at her, breathing roughly. It’s clear what he wants as he crowds her against the wall, standing with his legs spread. “Are you going to be good for me?”

Alina looks at him from under lowered lashes, feeling a little dangerous and more than a little coy. “That depends on how bad you want it, doesn’t it?” She clicks her teeth at him, playfully.

Ivan opens his pants further, exposing his erect member, already bouncing with his heartbeat. “Taste me. On your tongue.”

“Tell me how you want it,” she says, lapping at his slit, listening to his breathing shift with anticipation. “I'll allow you to tell me. *This time*. Since you’ve been so good tonight.” He gets off on ordering her around and she knows it.

His throat works as he stares down at her, eyes dark and hungry. “Put me in your mouth. I want your throat.”

With another lick at his sensitive tip, Alina obliges him, listening to the way he groans, his head falling back as he buries himself in her.

---

---

When the night of Fedyor’s birthday rolls around once more, Alina does her usual baking, filling the apartment with the scent of cake and brownies. It’s definitely more than she and Ivan can eat, so she’ll end up giving half away to Katja and the children the day after.

She’s left Ivan alone for most of the day, always giving him whatever space he wants. It’s his time to decide on how he was to grieve, if he still feels the urge to do so. He’s been out and about, but when he comes home, he seems more than happy to listen to her chatter away to Plant Fedyor.

When Alina sings happy birthday to the plant, Ivan rolls his eyes and tells her that he can't stand her voice, that she shouldn't torture Fedyor with that racket. Alina takes it all with a grain of sand; she's not that awful. Ivan just likes making fun of her.

She's wearing Fedyor's cologne, as is half the house, seeing as she made sure to spray everything fabric with it. It's always a welcome gesture; they both love the scent. Though Ivan never wears it, he's never bothered by Alina wearing it, nor is he bothered by her spraying his pillow with it.

When it comes time for bed, Ivan pauses in the doorway, an indecipherable expression on his face. His eyes might be on her, but he's not actually seeing her. He's far away.

"You look torn," Alina says to him as she strips into her nightgown. Putting her hair up into a very messy, unkept bun, she tilts her head at him. "You don't need to sleep in here. I won't be offended, if you want to stay in your- *ah*, the other room. With his things."

He looks a little relieved, as if he thought she wouldn't be alright with it. He forgets that she isn't like him. "Are you sure? What about your nightmares?"

Hopping into bed, Alina grins at him, her nose wrinkling sweetly. "I'll be fine. I'll miss you, but I'll be perfectly fine. Goodnight."

In his own way of saying goodnight, he raps his fist lightly against the doorframe before stepping away, heading towards his old room, where all of Fedyor's belongings still remain. It's like a museum in there, some sort of sacred space that they both visit from time to time.

Alina allows herself to spread across the empty bed like a pleased starfish, smiling to herself. It's funny; she rarely gets to sleep alone now. It's sort of nice, to have all the space again. If Ivan needs space, he needs space and she'll not tell him no when it comes to Fedyor's memory.

~*~

It's very late when Ivan ends up coming back to their bed -*it's so hard to remember to call it that*- and the way he crawls into the sheets and rests his head on her chest tells Alina he wants to be held and soothed.

So, that's what she does, albeit a little sleepily. She'd actually been sleeping!

"You didn't have to check in on me," she says, caressing his scalp with her nails, half out of it. She'll give comfort where it's due, if he's feeling a little sad. "I told you, I'm fine. Focus on you for once."

His voice is a murmur. "I want to be with you."

Oh. Okay.

Eyes still closed, Alina runs her fingers over his scalp, gently ghosts her fingertips over the nape of his neck, causing his skin to prickle with sensation. She holds him close and rubs his back, sighing. She's very sleepy.

Alina hopes he's okay and that she's doing this comforting thing right-

"Did you ever sleep with him?"

The question wakes her up, because it doesn't make any sense to her fuzzy mind. "With… who?" Why is this relevant right about now? Where is his mind?

"Fedyor."

It doesn't register for a moment. Then, Alina sits up, having slipped out from under him, gazing down at him in open-mouthed disbelief. "No, but if that's what you've thought all these years, I damn well wish I had! Why on earth did you think he would even do that to you? The two of you were like this." She holds up her fingers and crosses two of them, demonstrating what they were like.

He's suspiciously slow to answer. Alina watches the way his throat works; sees how he won't look at her. This is otherworldly, because how is this even a question?!

"Fedyor adored you, and you treated him…you never treat me the way you treated him. You were always so different, back then. With him."

No shit, sherlock. With a very sarcastic voice, Alina replies, "Maybe that should tell you something, because ironically, you're the one I *am* sleeping with. This is too deep a conversation for how late it is. Did you want to snuggle or did you want to worry about things that never happened? I promise, one will feel better than the other."

Ivan sighs and Alina has no idea where this vulnerability and insecurity is coming from. "I'm serious. I was closer to hitting it with you than I was with him and you damn well know it, Ivan." She leans down to say in his ear teasingly, "You're the one who gets off on conflict. Don't you remember that time in Shu Han?"

He pauses, likely remembering the very situation in question. The time when it felt like something could have snapped, something bloody and colored with teeth, yet somehow *didn't*. Something that hung on by the sheer strength of his loyalty to both Fedyor and the Darkling. "That's not the point, stop distracting from my question. I saw the way you two were-"

Alina flops back into her pillow after fluffing it in a huff of emotion. She really just wants to go to sleep and here Ivan is, deciding now is the perfect time to unleash his repressed feelings. Why is she not surprised? He feels safer when the dark hides what he's feeling.

"I loved him," she says calmly. "That's the whole story. *Nothing more*. You trusted Fedyor more than this, there's no reason to falter now."

Some of the tension bleeds out of his body, muscles no longer tight and all wound up. "I know." He sounds resigned. "I don't know why it's on my mind now."

"I hate to tell you that you're being silly…but you're *being silly*." She pauses, coming close enough to pet him soothingly again. "Are you feeling jealous?"

“I have no idea what I’m feeling right now.”

“Is it about me, or is it about him?” Alina keeps her tone soothing and calm, because getting irritable with him when he’s feeling like sharing is not a good idea.

He makes a frustrated sound. “I don’t know. Both.”

Alina could laugh, because he sounds so utterly lost, completely confused by his feelings. “Care to elaborate?”

Ivan roughly rubs his face. “I don’t like the idea of him being with you. But, then I don’t like the idea of you being with him. Then, there’s a part of me that would have liked to have you both at the same ti-”

*Whoa there, Sir Insatiable…*

“You’re right,” Alina interrupts, twisting her mouth in bewilderment. “That’s pretty much the most confusing thing I’ve ever heard. Did we want to unpack all that tonight? Because, regardless of whatever wild fantasies you have bouncing in your brain, he and I still never got in bed together. If you want to dream about having us both, well, *dream away*. Can we go back to sleep now?”

“Oh, are you tired?” Now, he sounds a little better, more amused and less tormented.

“It’s like three am; being tired seems reasonable, doesn’t it?”

“Sure. Goodnight.”

The room goes silent, the crickets sounding outside.

“*Wait*. So, how are you having us both? How is that working?” Alina can’t stop it from popping into her head now that he’s brought it up. “Are you thinking like, you’d be in him, and he’d be in-”

Ivan chuckles. “No, it’s too late, we’re going to sleep now.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, but, I want to *know*-”

“You’ll have to keep wondering.” His heartrending zips through her like a soft kiss goodnight, dipping her into oblivion.

---

---

Another year passes. Then another. The sleepy town remains the same, day in and day out, though more and more boys and girls are drafted as they age, pushed into the First Army at alarming rates.

There are whispers in the streets, of course. Whispered concerns about *why*.

Alina tries to ignore what she hears, because it makes her uneasy. She reasons with herself that Aleksander cannot move the Fold without her at his side- *and she's not with him*. Her power has grown over the years, almost to the point that she can consume the entire cave that she practices in with light, glittering gold.

She can even make the Cut. The very same thing that Aleksander could, only hers is made with light. It took so much practice, so much concentration and dedication…but finally…she has it.

These leaps and bounds in power instill her with false confidence; it will never change the fact that Aleksander killed the Stag, that Alina only showed it mercy. She's not sure she'll be strong enough to overpower him, considering he still holds her leash, still has her collared.

*Worries for another time…worries for when he summons me once more…*

This is what she tells herself, anyway. In short, it's procrastination. It's her specialty; avoiding the problem. Pretending the crisis is not her own. It's childish and selfish, and yet she cannot change this small part of her.

She tells herself that when she returns to the Little Palace, she'll be better equipped to refuse him. She'll be able to take everything back and destroy the Fold once and for all. She convinces herself that she'll be strong *enough*.

Besides, there's been no word from Aleksander, there's been no summons, so Alina tells herself that all these strange whispers in town, these drafts, it's all just coincidence. The First Army must have many men retiring from service, aging out. They simply need more young women and men to fill in the gaps.

If you aren't a skilled worker, you're a soldier. It's always been that way.

~*~

She ignores it until things grow even more strange and ominous. It happens one day in the shop, while she's working on finishing up the presentation of a few maps. Timur has a new commission for her; what he tells her makes her head spin.

Alina gives Timur a very confused look, mind turning over his words. She gives Viktor a glance across the room, where he's working on his own commission, now that he's no longer an apprentice. "Can you repeat what the request is? I…*ah*…don't think I've heard you right."

The master mapmaker shrugs his big shoulders. "You heard me right. I know, it's a very strange request…"

"That's an understatement," Alina interrupts, aghast. "It isn't even historical; it's completely made up!"

It's madness. Who asks for a map of something that isn't even accurate? In *any* time period?

“I don’t make the requests,” Timur says. “I just take them. They want a map with the Fold completely over all of Fjerda.”

“That’s twisted,” Viktor mutters from his side of the room. “Sick, actually. Who wants to see that on their wall and fantasize about crushing an entire nation like that?” He shudders.

Alina finds herself staring at nothing, her mind thinking about the map she’s being asked to make. Envisioning it. She thinks of the Fold, of the monsters within, all those poor souls consumed and turned into beasts.

She reminds herself that this is all hypothetical; the Fold cannot move *without her*.

The Fold will never move again. She won’t allow it.

“I’ll make it,” Alina utters flatly. “Let them have their sick fantasy.”

Timur pats her on the shoulder. “That’s my girl.”

---

---

It’s interesting how for these past few years, Alina hasn’t truly noticed the passing of time, being that she’s been with Ivan, alone, for the majority of it.

She finally struck by a sudden, sharp pain when one of her girls from the orphanage, Oksana, comes to ask her to be the godmother of her baby. Oksana, one of the teenagers that she watched grow from awkward and giggling, to a lovely young woman.

Alina didn’t even realize time had passed so swiftly until the nineteen-year-old stopped her in the street one afternoon, informing her of her exciting news.

“I’ve put a lot of thought into it, and Gregory and I have discussed it,” Oksana says with bright blue eyes. “We want you to be the godmother. You made such a difference in both our lives.”

But, but Alina can’t! She doesn’t age, she can’t take on this sort of responsibility! She’s Grisha and Oksana has no idea, none of the children from the orphanage know. Not only that, she’s the Sun Summoner, to top it all off.

Stunned, Alina barely manages to say with a weak smile, “I’m so happy for you…but…don’t you want Vera or Marina to be the godmother? They’ve been your closest friends.”

It’s terrifying. It seems like just yesterday that the three girls were laughing and giggling, trailing behind Alina, asking about what it’s like to have a boyfriend. Where did the time go?

The pretty young woman rolls her eyes and laughs charmingly. “They’d both fight over who gets to be ‘the one’. Besides, Marina is only seventeen and Vera is…well, easily distracted. I

want it to be you. Please think it over for me?"

Her heart feels ill, sick like a wounded animal. Oh, how Alina wishes she could just say yes, but it feels like a lie, because she isn't *Miss Lina*; she's Alina Starkov. Why does this hurt so terribly, as if the sky is falling down?

Worse, is the knowledge that she helped raise this girl…and she's not a girl anymore. She's moving on, she's growing up, starting a family of her own…

Forcing herself to hide how awful she's feeling inside, Alina smiles and nods, saying, "I'll think about it. I'm flattered, really, I am."

"Great! By the way," Oksana says slyly. "You look fabulous. Tell me your aging secrets, one of these days, will you?"

"Of course…" Alina says quietly, watching her former orphan walk away.

*Oh, Saints, I'm going to cry,* Alina finds herself thinking, like a deer caught in the sights of a hunter.

Making a beeline for home, Alina barely holds her emotions in check. When she steps through the door, she bursts into tears, uncontrollably.

~*~

It's how Ivan finds her when he comes home smelling of the forest, later.

He's standing the doorway of her bedroom -*their bedroom*- looking at her with a slight amount of concern. He's not seen her cry like this in a long time. "What's wrong?"

Alina realizes she must make quite a sight, the way she's curled up in the middle of the bed, wrapped up in sheets and cocooned between a nest of pillows. It looks like a hurricane has torn through. "*Nothing*," she barely sobs out, covering her face with her hands.

"I know that's not true," he replies calmly. "Give me a different answer."

Damn him and his heartrending!

"My kids…" she sniffles, fighting the sob-filled hiccups.

"Yes…?"

"They're growing up." It's sounds silly, even to her own ears, but she feels downright distraught and she can't seem to get it under control, as if she's wrangling a crocodile.

There's a hint of amusement in Ivan's voice when she hears him say, "They tend to do that, don't they? Like weeds."

*Oh, that's not the point!*

“She was fourteen when I met her!” Alina sobs, the ugly sort. “Now, she’s nineteen and pregnant and has a place of her own and I just can’t-”

Bringing her pillow up to her face, Alina feels a wild rush of emotion crash over her, thinking about all her orphan children growing up and moving on, the fact that she’ll see them age and die…age and die and she’ll remain the same, having to watch from afar, because they *can’t know*-

“That’s life isn’t it? Growing up?”

She tosses her pillow aside.

Lower lip trembling, Alina hiccups sadly, “That’s not the point, my children are-are-are g-getting o-old.”

There’s something like amusement in Ivan’s eyes as he observes her. He leans against the doorframe lazily. His smirk makes its appearance and Alina is *too* distraught. “So, is she married up like a decent girl…or is she more like you?”

At this, Alina sits up and gives him a dirty look, somehow managing that.

Spine straightening slightly, Alina wipes at her tears so she can focus on him clearly. *Ugh*, he always cuts such a figure when he’s looking down at her like that. “What’s that supposed to mean? More like me?”

His smirk grows wider, a hint of his canine showing.

Oh, he’s calling her a whore again. She doesn’t mind when they’re in bed, in fact, she kind of likes it, *but they aren’t in bed right this minute*, now are they?

She sniffs, trying to pull herself together. “She’s getting married next month. So, *no,* not like me.” Alina finds herself flushing red.

He chuckles, the sound coiling in her chest as he pushes himself off the doorframe and makes his way over to her on the bed.

“Why are you laughing at me? This isn’t funny.” Alina wipes at her face again, trying to look somewhat presentable, even though her hair is a mess, and she’s only wearing a comfy, overlarge shirt. “I’m distraught, I have to watch them all leave me-”

“You’re clearly on the rag, that’s why I’m laughing.”

Alina gapes at him. He did not just go there. He did! “You’re not supposed to say things like that! I’m upset and you’re making fun of me!”

“Come on, hush this nonsense. I’ll make you feel better.” He crawls over her like some sort of predator, eyes locked on hers. He easily gets her lying on her pillows, her hair like some sort of wild halo. His hand works at his pants, undoing them-

Oh. Oh, he means to…oh, right now?!

Alina gapes up at him, even as her legs automatically open on autopilot, cradling his hips. "…but I'm on the rag."

Yeah. He's right. She *is* having her time of the month.

He's kissing her neck, sucking hard on her sensitive spots until she's gasping beneath him, hands pulling him closer instead of pushing him away. Ivan's voice is rough, like sandpaper as he replies, "…since when has that ever scared me?"

Never. The answer is *never*.

"You are such a beast. I'm emotionally distraught, and *all you can think about*-"

There goes her smallclothes.

He's murmuring persuasively in her ear, "Shh…come on, open up. There, just-"

...and oh, his manhood is hard, jutting upwards towards his belly. He's not even removed his shirt. She feels herself growing swollen, achy, just looking at him, feeling the way he's looking at her with hunger.

He's not listening to her, *oh*, they are going to regret this. "Ivan, we should get a towel, it's going to be a mes-"

…definitely not listening.

"Oh, Saints," he groans, sliding home with ease. "You feel so good."

Alina gasps, all while making an embarrassing hiccupping noise, her tears still exiting the scene. He fills her deep, and she feels far too sensitive. Regardless of her feelings on the matter, she angles her hips, trying to take more.

For a few moments, Ivan doesn't move. Instead, he opts to fill her mouth with his tongue, languidly tasting her, as if she's some sort of exotic honey.

After a few moments of this, Alina turns her face away to sniffle a bit, battling down the warring emotions of a sadness and lust mixing inside of her. The sadness is losing its footing; the growing hunger inside of her is like an open maw.

It's easy to want him, especially when he feels so good inside of her.

Ivan nuzzles her and for a minute she thinks he's being patronizing of her over-emotional state. "Are you still making fun of me?" She asks in a sad little tone, even as heat boils inside of her, sparks of desire crawling through her veins.

He grins against the delicate skin of her neck; she can feel the warning of his teeth. "Does it feel like I am?" Ivan slowly grinds his hips into hers, making her keen weakly, flexing around him eagerly.

"I don't know. You think-"

He palms her ass briefly, fingers dipping daringly between her cheeks in a way that makes her belly flip with anxious anticipation, but instead of filling her there as well, his hand travels up to caress the soft skin of her belly. “I think you don’t need to be sad about your kids moving on,” he murmurs, nipping her ear with a gentleness born of sheer restraint. He wants to bite her, she can tell, but he’s holding himself back, for whatever reason. His hips roll deliciously, going fluid as he opens her up more with his cock, stroking her inner walls. “I can always give you more, to replace what you’re losing.”

Ivan gives her a very meaningful thrust.

It’s one of those things that’s simultaneously terrifying and arousing. Terrifying, because of their *particular* situation. Regardless, Alina’s insides literally go up in flames with wild, animal-instinct arousal. There’s no mistaking that he feels it too, the way her baser instincts purr at the sordid proposal, the idea of mating, like some sort of alley cat in heat.

Alina’s hips rock into his hard and he cups her ass again, pulling her against him aggressively, a growl in his chest. Ivan’s hips swing a little rougher, betraying his own arousal as he hisses, “You like that, huh? Turns you on?”

Flushing with embarrassment, because it *does* turn her on, even if the logical part of her knows that he loathes children. The logical part of her brain is *very* small right about now, but it still exists.

Instead of responding, she digs her fingernails into his back, feeling the way he shudders in delight. “Harder,” Ivan demands of her. “Mark me up.”

Alina obliges, dragging her nails down his spine, hard enough to break the skin. She brushes her teeth against his shoulder, teasingly. His hips roll into hers, riding her smoothly instead of hard, slowly pulling her to the edge of need.

The burn inside of her core builds and builds, like a fire growing out of control. She feels so ready, like a string ready to break. She needs *more*. Bucking her hips into him, Alina tries to control the speed, begging, “Come on, come on, *stop playing around*.”

That’s about as close as she’ll ever get to saying, *hurry up and fuck me into the mattress, you bastard.*

Ivan reads between the lines, changing the angle of his thrusts, making them deep and hard, enough to make her see stars.

She clenches down on him, keening as she races to finish line, all other thought leaving her head. Ivan grunts, his manhood kicking inside of her as she pulls him closer, arms and legs wrapped around him as she climaxes suddenly, crying out wordlessly, her voice hoarse.

With a moan, Ivan gives a few more erratic thrusts before he goes still, spilling deep inside of her. He sets his teeth to her shoulder, biting down in a way that Alina knows will leave an indentation, if not a small wound.

It stings, but it doesn’t detract from Alina’s high.

When her breathing settles, her pulse calming down, Alina says, “We probably shouldn’t say stuff like that.”

He wipes sweat off his brow, an arrogant smirk tugging at his mouth as he looks down at her, resting on his forearms. “Probably not. But I know how it made you *feel*.” He kisses the bite mark on her shoulder fondly. He circles his hips a bit, making her gasp. “You like it. You like it *a lot*.”

*Ugh. Now, he’ll be arrogant and very superior.* “It was the heat of the moment. Don’t stroke your own ego; it’s unattractive.”

He snorts, unoffended.

“I told you we needed a towel,” she mutters when he finally pulls out, a flush still on her cheekbones.

There’s blood on him and he snorts sarcastically. “Whatever you need, your highness.”

“Draw me a bath.”

“Will you require a bottle of wine too, so you can keep crying?” Ivan says as he swaggers off. “Or did I make you all better?”

Alina scowls after him, because yes, he did.

////////////////////////////////

Alina Starkov has always played life loose and fast- and her heart is no exception.

She doesn’t even realize when she’s made another mistake in her life. A very large misjudgment.

Alina forgets that Ivan is her jailer.

She forgets it even if he *doesn’t*.

////////////////////////////////

The autumn season is on the horizon for the year when something in the air goes cold…and it isn’t just the weather.

Something is bothering Ivan. She senses an odd change, a certain distance in his gaze when he thinks she’s not paying attention. The way he suddenly becomes lost in thought, or the way he stays out of the apartment more than ever.

He doesn’t fight with her. He evades. *Everything*.

“Is something wrong? Did I do something?” She asks him, because she has no other way of knowing. She’s run her mind through every single possible thing that could be spurring this strange mood change in him, but she can’t grasp it.

Alina comes up blank.

His eyes run over her, neutral. Ivan seems so far away, even when he’s next to her. “Nothing’s wrong. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

Somehow, these words don’t make her feel any better. Not when he’s starting to have more quiet spells, where he seems to be brooding. Or the way he pushes himself too hard when he goes out to train physically in the forest, pushing his body to its limits.

For the first time in a long time, Alina realizes he’s losing a battle at repressing something unpleasant.

…and she’s afraid of finding out what it is.

~*~

Alina’s only more convinced when he starts waking up in the middle of the night. That used to be her thing, but these past two weeks it has suddenly become *his*.

This particular night, she’s deep in her slumber when her entire body jolts awake, physically and mentally. With a gasp, Alina’s eyes open, realizing her heart is racing, when it has no reason to be. It’s usually synced with his when they go to bed and-

He’s gasping behind her, his arms tight about her body. He’s wide awake, breathing as if he’s been running for miles.

Alina realizes he’s just had a nightmare. Something has his heart pounding in his chest, his grip on her too tight to be comfortable. As if she’s going to slip away, like smoke. He’s gripping her like she’s about to *disappear*.

“Ivan,” she mutters, her voice still thick with sleep, feeling the warm weight of him shifting behind her in bed. “What’s wrong?”

He doesn’t speak and a quick glance over her shoulder at the tight expression on his face tells her that he’s not going to talk about it. Feelings and the act of sharing them are off-limits where he’s concerned, generally. She’s long accepted that he will never be like Mal, who could show softness and sweetness with ease, and that he’s certainly not like Aleksander, who finds ways to say just the right words to sway someone’s heart, even with falsehood.

His breathing is still rough, the panicked sort. Alina sighs and tries to squirm out of his tight grip, saying, “Do you want to talk about-”

His hand goes tight on her thigh, his fingers digging in possessively. She feels the draw of his power crawling down her spine, finding itself pooling between her thighs as her blood flow redirects in a way that leaves her panting.

No, he definitely doesn't want to talk about it.

*Oh, oh gosh,* she finds herself thinking as she goes slick in her smallclothes. It doesn't take all that long for her to feel swollen, aching to be filled, almost to the point of madness as he continues pushing her body into a state of complete arousal.

He's pushing *hard*, in a way he's *never* done to her before.

"Ivan," she pleads, sounded ragged even to her own ears. "That's too much…"

"*Quiet*." His tone is darker than a midnight shadow, booking no room for argument. Her belly tightens with lust, as if there is any room for more of *that*.

It feels like she's been dropped into a pool of *nothing but lust*, her mind going crimson. Everything is screaming inside of her to be taken, needing to be filled to the brim, wanting him more than she's ever wanted a single thing. Her insides twist and shriek for *more more more…*

It's too much. It's all too much, the way she feels herself dripping, craving him, the way she gasps eagerly when he tears away her clothes, her skin heated.

He passes himself between her folds a few times, gathering her wetness on his sex, allowing her to arch her back towards him like a desperate, filthy slag. Just as he slides inside, finally filling her, stretching her, Alina breaks with a cry, her sensitivity beyond all that she's ever experienced. Embarrassingly, she crests just as his belly meets her rear, clamping down on his girth hard.

She's never cum from him just *entering* her before and its near humiliating that he's spun her up this way.

His smug chuckle morphs into groan of pleasure, loud enough to fill the room and makes her heart pound a little faster. It's a small thing, but even through her haze of desire, she enjoys the sound of him enjoying her. To know that she did that, cracked his stern, powerhouse demeanor just a slight bit.

Her slight moment of victory is short lived.

Once more, she feels the telltale shift of his strength coursing through her, pushing her again to greater heights, causing Alina to groan in a pleasure-filled agony, sweating, feeling overheated as he shoves her to the edge of blissful agony. He's never been this forceful with his heartrending in bed and even as her mind spins, she wonders why he's acting like this.

As if he has something to prove.

He deals with uncomfortable feelings in all the wrong ways, she finds herself thinking as his manhood throbs inside of her.

She's not entirely sure she *cares*. At least, not this exact moment. She'll probably care, when all the arousal bleeds away from her, allowing her to focus, to think straight.

Regardless, they aren't the sort to talk about emotions. At least…not in healthy, normal ways.

~*~

The next morning, she doesn't bring it up.

Neither does he.

However, he does use his heartrending, while she's still dozing in the early dawn, to soothe her aches, gently kissing her shoulder in apology.

Regardless of his softness in the morning, Ivan's even more emotionally withdrawn by the afternoon and it sends a shiver of concern down her spine.

---

---

There are days, when she goes through the market shopping, that she really wishes people had one inkling of how old she is. Even if her bones don't bloody ache with each and every step, she feels *ancient*.

When she haggles over goods, she gets treated as if she's a young girl without two braincells to rub together. It's annoying and she often finds herself whipping out her old angry hag demeanor just to be taken seriously.

Sometimes, Katja is the only one she can stand on the street, because Katja at least seems her age, can talk about the same sort of things that Alina can. If the old woman ever wonders how it is that Alina seems to know so much from another era, she never mentions.

After spending a seriously awful amount of time throwing her insignificant weight around the market, Alina makes her way home, her woven basket laden with goods, carrying fruits and vegetables to use for dinner. The merchants were *particularly* hateful today, uninterested in haggling at all.

It's always easier to get a good deal when Ivan comes with her, because his steely stare always makes nearly anyone give in. Alina, unfortunately, is not intimidating.

When she climbs up the stairs to their apartment, Alina calls out her arrival, even though she feels Ivan's awareness flash over her before she even utters a word. "Well, I think I got robbed. I swear, the older I get, the more cunning these merchants become. It's *offensive*. Don't they know I'm a little old woman?" He doesn't answer, which is rude, so she calls out his name. He is home, isn't he? "Ivan?"

When Alina gets to the landing of the apartment, she makes her way over to the kitchen, where she comes to a startled halt.

There's a bright flash of scarlet where it *doesn't belong*.

Something inside of her screams, a bloodcurdling sensation running through her bones. It feels like a full body heart attack, the way everything seizes at once.

Ivan's standing in front of the window, his arms neatly folded behind his back, wearing his *Corporalki kefta*. He's looking into the distance, the fine cut of his shoulders severe. A soldier's stance. A sharp, sudden chill runs down her spine. He's not turned to greet her, so she repeats his name with a nervous tremble in her voice.

*Why is he wearing that horrid thing…why is he wearing it, why is he wearing…*

It's then that she notices a letter clutched in his hand. With a familiar seal on it. Her heart nearly stops and her guts twist up violently. The basket in her hand crashes to the floor and the only thing in her mind now is *no no no no no I don't want to go back it's too soon no no no why is he doing this to us….*

He senses her state of being, the frantic race of her pulse, overrun with fear. He slowly turns to face her, seemingly taking pity on the fact that she's nearly hyperventilating as she leans against the kitchen counter. Though his stony expression doesn't soften, he briefly seems pained by the look on her face.

He takes a step towards her, reaching out his hand towards her wrist, seeking to soothe her, but she scurries back from him, as if he's a poisonous snake.

Betrayal is gutting her, like a deer strung up for butchering. Like her bones are being torn out with her spine. Nerves, flesh, blood, all of it. *Red red red…*

"Don't touch me," she wheezes, a hand clutching at her chest, now tight with a strange sort of trapped panic. "Why are you wearing that? Take it off." She squeezes her eyes shut, as if that will make everything disappear. "Make it *go away*." Her voice cracks like a broken thing.

*It's too soon…*

"You knew this day would come," he says quietly. "The General has ordered you back-"

Her voice sounds like torment and agony, tight and wrecked. "*I don't want to go back*!"

The logical part of Alina realizes that she needs to go back to destroy the Fold, if she ever wants to take it down, she needs to return, but the emotional part of her isn't ready to accept that what she has is *over* forever.

"That's too bad," Ivan replies flatly, expression shadowed. "You had your freedom playing house; now it's time to pay up."

She's forgotten how *awful* he is. How did she forget that? How did she forget what it feels like to want to sink her thumbs deep into his eye sockets?

"We could just ignore him," she reasons. "We could leave-"

Growling, Ivan shakes his head and makes a sharp cutting motion with his hand. "Where would we go that he couldn't follow? If you think he won't follow you to the ends of the

world, you've lost your mind. He's giving you a chance to come back without a fight, *like you promised you would*."

Jaw clenched, eyes stinging with tears, Alina looks away from him, unable to accept what she's hearing. Betrayal tastes rotten on her tongue and above everything else she finds herself unable to stop from blaming Ivan for this.

"Look at me," he says tightly.

She won't.

He sneers at her refusal, voice going nasty. "You will pack whatever you intend to bring with. We are leaving, even if I have to drag you back by your hair-"

This makes Alina look at him, her eyes flashing. That's a brand of cruelty she hasn't heard out of his mouth in a very long time. *Years*. She smiles and there's nothing about it that's friendly or happy. "Well, well. There *you* are. I almost thought you'd changed. How stupid I've been."

Ivan exhales hard. He sees the accusation in her gaze. It's the betrayed look in her eye that seems to annoy him, as if he thinks she has no right to look at him that way.

"How can you stand there, as if this has all meant nothing?" Her voice cracks with pain, like a knife scraping against bone.

His eyes are hard, without any form of remorse. "This is who I am. This is who I've *always* been." He gestures to the room, the cozy home they've been living in for the past six years. "This was just a fantasy. It's *not real*. Don't pretend there was ever going to be a different outcome."

The words are like a slap in the face.

"Maybe I would have liked to pretend this outcome wasn't going to happen," Alina rasps. "Maybe I wanted to believe you wouldn't leap to do his bidding the minute he called upon you, *as if he's been the one sharing your bed all these years*."

"Alina-"

"I'm sure you're pleased," she replies hatefully. "You'll be reunited with *your master*."

The blood drains from his face at her words, the only sign she gets that he's livid.

Spinning on her heel, vision blurred, Alina goes to *her* room and knocks everything off *her* desk, whipping some small book at the mirror on her wall, watching with vicious satisfaction as it crashes to the ground and breaks into pieces. She wants to destroy everything. She wants to tear up the floorboards until her fingernails bleed and break.

She wants *pain* in a way she hasn't for a very, very long time.

She crosses the room heedlessly, making her way to the dresser to start tearing that apart, numb to the agony of stepping on glass.

Appearing in the doorway, Ivan surveys the damage with wide eyes. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

With a rough heave, Alina snaps out the drawer and lets it crash on the floor with a bang. “*Stop me*. It’s what you’re good at.” She’s daring him, desperate to make him into the monster she wants him to be. She's pure destruction, yanking at the next drawer, and then the next.

She picks up her jewelry chest and whips it at him, dissatisfied that he easily avoids it and the flying jewels within. It’s clear that even after all these years, *he’s still used to dealing with this side of her*.

He makes a sharp motion with his hands and Alina’s heart sounds loudly in her head as he heartrends her into stillness. “Enough,” he rasps. “Before you hurt yourself more.”

Alina couldn’t move even if she wanted to. Her breathing goes deep and slow, arms dropping to her sides numbly. This feels like a drug, like she’s being swept under something far more powerful than she. Alina gives in, not able to fight the way her body goes lax, eyes drooping.

When her legs give out weakly, she doesn’t crash to the ground, only because Ivan catches her.

He never would have caught her, years ago in the Little Palace. He would have let her drop to the hard floor with cold, uncaring eyes.

*He’s the same man, the same man…he’s always been this way…he never cared…*

Only, he’s not twisting up her insides violently, the way he always used to do with his heartrending, the way he used to make her bleed-

“You didn’t do it how you used to. You didn’t make it hurt…” Alina slurs, confused.

He sweeps her up into his arms and carries her to the bed. “I don’t want to hurt you.” Even as he says it, Ivan pulls glass from her foot, which she also doesn’t feel. Alina doesn’t even feel him attempt to heal the slice. He slows the bleeding enough so that he can bandage it, all while she sits numbly, completely under his control like an injured little bird.

Alina sniffs, when he’s done, when he backs away from her. “I hate you,” she whispers.

She vaguely wants to kill him, she knows her heart feels like it’s breaking, but these feelings are so far away, covered by his small science.

Somehow, he manages to not flinch. Instead, he says, “Good. That’s how you’re supposed to feel about me.” He makes a few gestures with his hand, easing her further into a numb stupor, her pain floating away, her feelings floating into nowhere. He reiterates, “We leave in the morning.”

"...but why..."

He's gritting his teeth, as if pained. "Because he commanded us back...and you belong to him. You always have."

If Alina had any feelings to work with, she would be screaming and clawing at the collar lodged at her throat.

Vaguely, she hears him leave the apartment, likely to collect himself, even though he seemed pretty collected already. It’s amazing how easily he slips back into his role as dutiful guard. She wonders if he even takes his *kefta* off before he leaves the apartment, or if everyone in town now knows what they are.

That night, he doesn’t come to their bed and for some reason it makes her even more angry when the clutch of his small science fades away.

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** Comments and kudos are loved, because now I'm crying about this T.T

Big Sad! Sad and smut, naturally, go figure. I know we had a lot going on in this chapter, so hopefully it works...probably could have split it into two, but didn't want to go that route and drag things on superficially...will probably be coming back to make edits to this chapter, I have some shit I'd probably like to flesh out eventually, but since I don't want to make you wait longer, here we go!

Also, forgive typos. I'm fixing them, but my eyeballs are tired of staring at this beast XD

# Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

**AN:** Excuse any typos- I'll be coming back AGAIN to edit soon, I'm just exhausted from staring at this beast...

Oh. And ANGST is back. I'm gonna go sit in my corner and shut up now...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Little Palace is unchanged, as if time hasn't passed. As if nearly a decade of time hasn't occurred. It grows closer, with every passing second, looming.

Never in her life has Alina wanted to fling herself out of a moving coach more than she does right this very moment. She can only suffocate for so long, and she's been a living miasma of misery and betrayal for days.

Today though, is the worst, because Ivan hasn't used his small science on her to keep her in a lazy, not-quite-lucid state. The first day of travel, he'd made the mistake of *not* calming her pulse, which led to some domestic violence that made even their coach driver nervous.

*{"I should have slit your throat when I had the chance," Alina had snarled, trying to close her fingers around his neck inside of the coach, halfway through the first day of travel, growling like some sort of wildcat.*

*"You missed your chance," Ivan sneered. "Should have done it in bed."*

*"Bastard!"*

*The driver had knocked on the top of the coach, asking nervously, "hey, mister, are you two alright-"*

*"We're fine!" Ivan yelled, pushing Alina off of him. "Just. Drive."}*

After that debacle, Ivan decided that his small science was required to keep Alina manageable, which she didn't disagree with. In fact, now that her mind is clear again, she feels like crawling out of her own skin, unzipping and leaving it for the wolves.

The clarity drives home her sorrow and the ache in her chest, thinking of everything she's leaving behind and losing. She *loved* her life in the peaceful town and Ivan has taken it away from her, without even seeming to care.

As if he can forget everything that passed between them. Saints, she wants to do awful, awful things to him.

She almost wishes he would calm her with his power again, just so she can't feel a damn thing, the way *he doesn't feel anything* for her. Alas, they both know that Aleksander will want to greet Alina with her wits about her, appearing as if she came home without a single *boo hoo*.

When the coach slows down, approaching a small gathering at the front of the Little Palace, Alina feels her heart beat sickly. She's not had time to prepare herself mentally for this. For seeing the Darkling again.

They come to a sudden stop and Alina has to brace herself in order to not get flung in Ivan's lap. He studiously is not looking at her, has been ignoring her for hours. They barely speak, because if they do, it turns into an ugly argument.

The way it always did, *before*. It's as if the past few years never happened, the way Ivan reverts back to his cold, unpleasant self.

The coach door opens and Alina briefly closes her eyes, making a snap decision on how she wants to hold herself in front of the man who has summoned her back. *Poise*, poise and soft control should be fine. Proud, but not *too proud*. Sweet, but not fake. Her heart is beating terribly hard, trying to claw its way out of her rib cage. Trying to escape. She's amazed her heart can beat so hard; for a moment there, she thought her heart didn't quite function anymore, broken and torn in the mess that Ivan made of it.

The very same Ivan who is holding his hand out for her. "Out," he says shortly.

Opening her eyes, Alina schools her face into cool, confident serenity. She'll need it, for Aleksander. Without a single glance at Ivan, refusing to even touch his hand, Alina helps herself out of the coach, casting herself into the sunlight.

It seems that even the clouds wilt in the face of her return to the Little Palace, where it looms in the background. Standing just in front is the Darkling and Alina feels her heart leap at the very sight of him, the call of his darkness to her light.

A familiar feeling, but one she hasn't felt in a very long time.

He's as beautiful and terrible as she remembered, waiting for her in the chilling morning light, his dark hair, drifting with the wind. The great fur upon his shoulders, flickering, his cape long and billowing in the breeze.

The Darkling is a statue of calm, the surface of the great ocean. What lies underneath… well…Alina will see.

Aleksander is *not* a simple man.

Seeing her, he seems to exhale in what might be relief, his eyes taking in her form, as if searching for any sort of damage to his Sun Summoner.

*Tough luck. All the damage is internal,* Alina thinks. *Hidden where no one can see.*

Feeling the need to impress, Alina shifts her shoulders and lifts her head, adopting a quietly proud look. There is silence over the courtyard, and she knows that he's waiting for her to speak, just as she's waiting for him.

A power game. He plays his cards close to his chest, and he wants to see what card she plays first. Oh, this is what she hates about the Little Palace. *The games*.

He opens his arms slightly, palms facing upward in a clear gesture of expectation. Aleksander wants her to come to him. This makes her insides twist with irritation, this forcing of immediate affection from him, but regardless, she has no choice.

Alina must behave. She's only just arrived. It would be unsightly to begin throwing her fits now, not after he gave her years away. Aleksander would see it as ungrateful…and Alina doesn't need him to have ill-will towards her out of the gate.

No, he'll have missed her. It's better for him to feel eager to see her, than apprehensive.

The Darkling's eyes are pinned to her as she walks forward, each step thundering in her skull as she approaches him. His gaze is stealing away the breath from her lungs and she forces herself to remain serene, like a distant star.

She is the unattainable…and that's what he *chases*.

Each step brings her closer to him and her heart is caught in her throat. She wonders if Ivan's eyes are on her spine or if he's still pretending she's an uninteresting wallflower. Then, she's stepping into Aleksander's arms, folding herself against his chest, as she's done a thousand times before.

She feels him sigh in relief as his arms go around her. One of his hands buries itself in her hair, gently holding her to him, her ear at his chest. He smells of rich sandalwood, of moonlight in a dark forest, of woods and shadow.

"I missed you," he says softly as he tilts his head downward to talk to her, breaking his practiced silence.

"I'm sure you didn't even notice my absence," Alina replies a lightly as she can manage, though the comment is slightly unkind.

She can feel his smooth, dark chuckle resonate in his chest, where her head is pressed. "As unyielding as ever, aren't you? Even one such as I can feel the passing of time when you aren't close."

Oh, his lovely, effortless words! When Aleksander plays nice, he can be the most wonderful, adoring man on the entire continent. On the surface, at least. Just don't look below his handsome veneer to the power-hungry darkness within.

Now, he's talking over her head to Ivan. "It's a blessing to see you both in good health," Aleksander says, voice charming.

"The trip back wasn't taxing, *moi soverenyi*."

Alina feels the way that Aleksander exhales, a slight huff through his nose and that's when she wonders if he's irritated about something. The small tells of displeasure…she remembers them, clear as day. Dark as night.

"That's good to hear." The Darkling pauses, then speaks again, as if confused. He's stroking her hair, as if soothing her or himself, Alina can't be sure. "That's why I'm having some trouble understanding what the delay was in returning. Did my first summons not reach you last month? Are you sure there wasn't any trouble on the road?"

Those words set off warning bells in Alina's head and she tries to not react or stiffen in *any* way while he's still holding her. Hell, it's a struggle to keep breathing normally, without a single pause or hitch. She realizes, without a doubt, that he's been seething over this question for days, *weeks,* maybe. That he waited until this *exact* moment, with her in his arms, to question his favored heartrender.

Aleksander can't confirm if Ivan lies, but he can read the way Alina reacts.

So, she *doesn't react*.

Which, is harder than she imagined, because now her mind is spinning like a tornado, everything in her brain scattering, being thrown around violently with the howling in her skull. *Ivan…Ivan knew that he summoned us back over a month ago? And…he didn't bring us back? He* ***delayed*** *after receiving a direct order from Aleksander?*

"My apologies, I never received one, *moi soverenyi*. I did receive the one from just over a week ago. The mail can be…unreliable in the West, as you know."

There's a painful pause as the Darkling allows the words to sit uncomfortably between them. Alina is glad that her face is hidden, because this is a deeply disconcerting situation. Right out of the gates to boot.

She feels the way Aleksander glances off at something in the distance, making his own decision on if he wants to believe Ivan or not. Alina has only a suspicion that Ivan is lying through his damn teeth, the heartless *monster*.

The Darkling, however, has no reason to think his right-hand man is leading him astray. And so, he graciously chooses to accept Ivan's word. "Ah, yes. They've always had some issues with the post, after *Novokribirsk*. A pity they haven't managed to get that straightened out, after all these years."

"Indeed."

The Darkling allows Alina to step back out of his embrace, bringing her to stand beside him. His eyes search her face, as if he can't get over the fact that she's actually with him again. Without looking away from her, Aleksander says, "That will be all for now, Ivan. Thank you for taking such good care of my Sun Summoner."

Something small inside of Alina screeches like a mad bird.

The heartrender stiffens unexpectedly and for a horrible moment, Alina wonders why he's not leaving them. It was a clear dismissal and-

His eyes flicker to her only briefly, there and away, before he finally, *finally* inclines his head to Aleksander with respect, saying roughly, "*Moi soverenyi*."

When he leaves them, there's a certain reluctance in his stride. Alina notices it, her legs feeling unsteady as she does.

Surely the Darkling notices as well. He couldn't have missed that pause.

Aleksander gracefully says nothing, but his eyes speak a thousand unspoken words as he turns his gaze back to Alina's face. It takes all her willpower not to swallow guiltily.

Instead, Alina lifts her chin, only slightly, drawing herself up.

*Beauty, calm, and power. That's what I am. That's what I exude,* she repeats inside her head, until she embodies it.

She notices that a few servants are beginning to unload the coach she and Ivan traveled in, and when she sees one of them pull Plant Fedyor out from her seat, Alina loses all her *beauty, calm, and power* and simply races over there with her arms outstretched. "Do be careful! Please. That's mine. I'll take it from you."

"But, *Sankta*…" the serving man looks confused, slowly handing the pot over to her.

Saints, she hates when people call her that! Alina holds the pot in her arms and walks back to Aleksander's side, knowing he's not done conversing with her. Coming to a stop a few feet from him, Alina looks up at him expectantly, from around the blossoming orchid.

Aleksander looks down at the potted plant in her arms. His eyebrows rise slightly and it looks like he wants to question what on earth she's doing with a plant named Fedyor, but he exhales and shakes his head, thinking the better of it.

He's long accepted that Alina has her own peculiarities.

Instead, he says, "Your suite is waiting for you. It's *been* waiting for you. I'm sure you want to freshen up, after your long journey."

How thoughtful of him. Yes, she'd love to freshen up; she'd love to wash off the past few days of sharing a small, confined space with a man that she dearly wants to murder and cry on simultaneously. Just being in that coach with Ivan had been hell on earth itself, even if she'd been out of it for a good portion of the trip.

She's certain her clothes don't even smell like her. Alina wants to wash him *off*. She wants to scrub Ivan out of her pores and throw her shattered, useless heart off a cliff, wants to watch it go splat thousands of feet below.

"That would be lovely," Alina replies to him coolly, because he's watching her behavior carefully. He's going to be watching her behavior. Aleksander *wants gratitude*; not angry,

hateful Alina. “Will you eat supper with me, Aleksander?”

The way he inhales sharply tells her that he wasn’t expecting her to ask. She can tell how quietly pleased he is. Those eyes of his steadily hold her gaze and he says softly, “Of course. You know where my chambers are.”

Yes. Yes, Alina *does* know.

---

---

When she enters the Little Palace, trailed by two of Aleksander’s *Oprichniki*, Alina makes a harsh beeline for her suite, Plant Fedyor cheerily bouncing around in her arms. Fedyor, always so damn cheerful, even as a bloody plant. *Ugh*. She was not about to let Ivan have him. She claimed custody, back when they left their home in the West.

They went straight to getting divorced instead of ever getting married. What a laugh.

She'd especially enjoyed launching every single thing Ivan ever bought her in a box to be burned. Alina has no idea what happened with that, but the very act of parting with his gifts made her angry soul feel victorious.

Being in the Little Palace feels suffocating and she’s hanging on by a thread, trying to keep from coming unglued in the middle of some hallway. All she can think about is *Ivan* and he’s the absolute last thing that should be on her mind. Alina needs her wits about her.

*Just get to your suite, then you can do whatever sets your brain right.*

She receives a few odd glances, here and there, from Grisha who don’t recognize her. She’s not wearing a *kefta*, so many of them look down at her, as if she’s some sort of servant girl. Whatever. When one girl looks her up and down skeptically, Alina snaps, “What’s wrong, never seen a Saint carrying a plant before?”

The female Grisha gapes at her in shock and Alina puffs herself up and marches on towards her old suite.

Her suite…where she’s going to sleep alone. *Without him*, without the person she’s been beside for years. An empty hole rips open inside of her and she wants to dig her nails into it and make it worse. Her heart and soul are at war, because she wants to be with Ivan, even as she wants to claw him into small pieces and dump him into the True Sea. Why does everything have to hurt this way?

Alina didn’t…she’s never even said, or even *thought* that she loved him, and yet she still feels like something inside of her has *died*.

When they reach her chambers, Alina glances at the pair of guards. She has a chore that one of them can complete. Immediately, because she knows things are about to get ugly the

minute she gets herself alone.

She's done holding herself together. One minute more and she can unleash the ugliness that's been building inside of her like a plague.

"Do send for a healer, won't you?" Alina says smoothly, her voice delicate as a flower, yet with an undercurrent of demand. "I have need of one."

The *Oprichniki* on the left has a young face and a surprisingly smooth jawline. He looks confused, his pale eyes darting over her body, as if searching for some gaping wound. "Are you injured, *Sankta*?"

Oh, how her insides shrivel up at the sound of that word! Curling up into a ball of worms, a mess of filth and irritation, slimy with purpose. Having to listen to people call her that again…is abhorrent. They only see her as a symbol instead of a human being.

The Darkling's lovely toy.

What would they all think if they knew she'd played whore for his favored heartrender, so easily cast aside? Her guts twist even harder, feeling dark and poisoned.

With a voice more ominous than sweet, Alina replies, "No. But I'm about to be." With those words and the horrified look on the young man's face, Alina swings open the double doors to her suite and enters with the air of a queen.

When she hears him run off, calling for a healer -*good boy*- Alina shuts the doors behind her with a soft click, surveying her old room. The suite itself is untouched, pristine. Just the way she left it. Nothing out of place or moved. Aleksander likely only allowed the maids to dust around the room, trying to keep her memory in his mind fresh.

He can be…oddly sentimental, if he *tries* his hand at it. Key word being try; he doesn't usually do that. Aleksander *tries* when it gains him something, which is why Alina rarely trusts him when he goes out of his way to 'please' her.

Despite all of this, the very sight of the room makes her skin crawl, like a thousand angry ants under her flesh. Alina wants to stab the bed with a very sharp knife, throw all the vases in a porcelain heap, shred the curtains with her teeth and scream until her throat bleeds.

She can do none of this, because technically, she should be on her best behavior. There is no way she can express her heartbreak, the one that's been gnawing at her bones for days, tearing her apart inside. Alina doesn't even know how Ivan could stand being near her, hearing the furious, agonized pounding of her heart and pulse on the days he didn't roll her over with his small science.

Everything hurts and she can't even act like the monstrous bitch that she wants to be. At least, not yet. Not when Aleksander is still playing nice with her.

So, she does the next best thing to tearing apart her room like a mad holy woman.

Putting Plant Fedyor safely on one of her tables, Alina grabs one of the pre-lit lanterns from the wall, removing the decorated glass, exposing the naked flame. With a numb expression, she places it on her desk and places her palm over it with resolve. At first, there is only the sensation of heat, telling her that it's *not enough*.

She wants to *burn*.

Dropping her palm further, Alina slowly waits until she feels something akin to ice cold… something that suddenly registers as pain. She exhales shakily, twitching her fingers over the open flame, feeling the center of her palm screeching in anguish from the heat.

She'll burn it bloody, until she can't feel what's hurting inside her chest. She'll burn away what she feels for him, wishes she could cut out every single memory of the last few years, gut herself and hand him her rotted, old heart.

*Here you go, Ivan. Step on it, crush it in your hand, bite it. I don't care anymore.*

There comes a knock at her double doors and Alina wonders how long she's been zoned out in her own rage and pain. "Enter," she replies coldly.

She's certain that her palm is boiled and peeling raw.

One door opens and a young woman pokes her head inside. "You called for a healer?" Then, her eyes see Alina in the dim of the room. As in; she truly sees what Alina's *doing*. Her mouth drops open, speechlessly.

Expression flat and empty, as if she's not actually burning herself, Alina says, "Well? *Come in*. Don't dawdle. This gets worse with every second, as I'm sure you're aware." The very sight of a red *kefta* makes her feel ill and violent.

The healer steps inside fully, looking very young and lost in her scarlet *kefta* with blue embroidery. "What are you doing?!"

"I think it's obvious." Saints, they didn't send her a dumb one, did they?

The young woman races over to Alina's side after another moment of shocked hesitation. She grabs Alina's hand and turns it over, hissing through her teeth at the sight of the red, burned, boiled flesh on her palm.

Her face says it all; she can't even begin to fathom why the Darkling's favorite would do something like this to herself. Why would the pampered Sun Summoner do something so horrid?

*Well, we all do terrible things in the dark when we're alone*, Alina thinks. *And I'm capable of anything.*

Placing a shaking hand over Alina's steady palm, the healer begins using her small science, beginning to heal the severely abused flesh. The sensation of healing is odd, tingling, sometimes burning just as terribly as the injury itself did. The healer glances upward to gaze at Alina's face, every now and then, her light eyes wary.

“Any longer and this would have taken multiple sessions to heal,” the girl scolds. A girl, who can’t be more than in her early twenties.

Alina doesn’t appreciate being scolded. “Perhaps if you had made haste in coming here, it wouldn’t have been so bad.” Oh, yes. Now her old hag tone is coming to life.

“Illya didn’t tell me you were burning your hand into a crisp. If I’d known, I would have come sooner.” She pauses. “Why would you do such a thing!?”

Scoffing with dark amusement, Alina’s eyes roll skyward. “There’s not enough time in this world for you to understand the *why*. Saints suffer. I’ve not been martyred yet, so I might as well suffer for it.”

“Well. There’s no need for you to *make* yourself suffer. The world makes us all suffer.” The healer steps away, pleased with her work. Alina’s hand is mostly healed, though the center is still pink and sore. “I expect I won’t have to heal this sort of injury for the *Sankta* again, right?”

Oh, Alina could just *laugh*.

“What gives you the impression that I won’t do it again? Oh, don’t look at me like that, *not tonight,* you silly thing. Maybe tomorrow night,” Alina drawls, uncaring that she sounds a tad bit unhinged and dangerous. She *is* dangerous. It’s time these pampered Grisha remember that. She looks the girl up and down. “What’s your name? I don’t recognize you.”

The healer draws herself up and salutes. “I’m Karyna, mistress Sun Summoner. I graduated from my training while you were away…so…I never had the…*honor* of meeting you.”

The way she says ‘honor’ tells Alina that the girl isn’t sure she likes Alina personally. A *pity*.

“Hm.” Alina picks up an old comb from inside of her dresser and begins to idly brush her long dark hair. The comb was a gift from Genya and she feels her heart sink at the thought as it makes its way through her tresses. “Who are the *Oprichniki* outside my door?”

“That would be Illya and Edik.”

New guards for her to play with. Joy. Alina nods, eyes back on her candle again. “You may go.”

Karyna pauses, also looking to the open flame. She reaches for it, “Maybe I should-”

“Leave it. If I wanted to burn myself again, I’d find a way. You taking one measly candle won’t stop me.”

The healer retracts her hand and after a moment, bows her head slightly. When she leaves, Alina allows herself to go over to her mirror, examining her face, seeing the darkness in her gaze. At least she seems less unhinged, feels like she’s not about to snap. Sometimes pain is a release.

She’ll have to get dressed for dinner with Aleksander.

Her eyes drift to her old armoire, where her *kefta* of midnight and gold hangs.

---

---

By nightfall, when she's suitably prepared, Alina is escorted to the Darkling's chambers for dinner. She cleans up good; no one will even know that she'd been burning a hole into her hand, only hours earlier. She's burned the madness right out of her, ensuring her behavior is good for him.

Instead of resistant, frowning Alina, all he'll get is a well-behaved Sun Summoner, with soft smiles and platitudes. She's burned as much pain out of her as she can handle for one day. He won't even know what turmoil lies inside of her.

Besides; she'll need her poise in case he decides to unveil his plans for her. For why he brought her back. Alina knows it can't be just because he 'missed' her. Oh no. It's never so innocent as all that.

~*~

Dinner is lovely, in Aleksander's private rooms. The ambience is always specific, dark and intimate. It's the times like these that she can almost forget what he is, what sort of monster lurks under his pleasant façade.

He's always been good at playing a charming, charismatic man. His draw on her is effortless, even as his hidden cruelties push her away. The push and pull of light and dark can never be denied, though Alina believes more and more of his darkness is rubbing off on her as the years go by.

Someday, she'll be like him…and that terrifies her.

"You seem better than when I last saw you, years past." Aleksander says to her over the table, noting that she's once more dressed in her former *kefta* of black and gold. Proof that she is his, wearing his colors. His eyes consume her, as they always have. "You've regained yourself, if I'm not mistaken."

*Regained your sanity*, he means.

Alina carefully slices the meat in front of her, raising a piece to her lips delicately. "It's almost like being at war for years on end puts people on edge- and when it's absent, they feel relieved." Seeing the way the skin around his eyes slightly tightens at that, she softens herself. "It was nice to finally live life the way I imagined it, before I became the Sun Summoner."

Aleksander gentles his expression; he's *also* trying to be on his best behavior, just as she is.

He wants to know how she's been. Of her *adventures*. This is an honest question, with honest curiosity behind it. Knowing everything about her is his way of feeling closer, even if it leaves her feeling exposed to him. It leaves her fearing that she's accidently given him something he can use against her in the future.

She tells him of her life away, the sanitized version of it. Aleksander is a very dedicated listener and she can always tell when something has sparked a thought in his head, just by the way his eyebrow quirk subtly, or the drift of his gaze, thinking.

"An orphanage? Volunteering?" He takes a sip from his wine, tasting it elegantly on his tongue. "I suppose, this does sound like you. Giving back to the weak and the poor." Aleksander gives her that ersatz smile of his, the one that can be seen as cool and detached. "My Alina. Always with such a *soft heart*." He's thinking of Mal, *probably*.

Alina rolls her shoulders slightly, taking a bite from her meal. "It made me happy."

"I imagine it did. I'm glad." His magnetic gaze drifts back to hers as he drawls, "Despite what you might think, I do not *enjoy* making you unhappy, Alina."

Alina bites her tongue, holding herself back from telling him what she really thinks of that statement. He doesn't enjoy her being unhappy; he wants her to be happy with very specific things that make *him* happy. It irritates him when she's not pleased with what he wants her to be happy *about*.

The Fold, for instance. It displeases him that she would rather destroy it than use it. He sees it as a betrayal of the Grisha, while Alina sees it as her duty to do good in the world for *everyone*.

"I suppose you gained some new attachments, in that town? At your orphanage?" He continues, keeping his tone carefully neutral, to hide any patronizing subtilties. "You realize that mortal attachments are…painful."

Alina can't tell if he's searching for more leverage over her. She wouldn't put it past him to threaten an entire town, just to keep her under his thumb. She runs her eyes over him languidly, assessing the fact that she knows he has no heartrender in the room to decipher her truths from her lies.

…and she's good at those. Lies. She's learned from him.

She glances around the room, masking her searching look by taking another sip of her drink.

"You've not mentioned Ivan."

The sudden conversation shift catches her off guard and gives her pause, her heart nearly twisting into nothing. She prays he hasn't seen how terribly the simple phrase has thrown her, how the sound of Ivan's name makes her throat tighten. She almost chokes on her wine. "*Ah*…I wasn't aware you wanted me to."

Aleksander looks very calm and collected, his eyebrows raised, mouth slightly open with consideration as he watches her. “I just find it interesting that you’ve not mentioned him once. Am I to believe you never once interacted in all these years?”

The reason she hasn’t mentioned Ivan, *aside from the obvious*, is because she can’t even think about him without feeling her insides scream in sheer agony. She hides her hands in her lap, under the table, squeezing her nails into her palms. Her freshly healed palm *aches,* as if a knife is casually stuck in it. “We kept out of each other’s way. You know how we get on. And we didn’t kill each other, so there’s that.”

The Darkling smiles a little at the last part, a small, there and gone expression. As if it never were. He’s evanescent like that; a lovely phantom. “Indeed. I would not have been pleased if the pair of you had seen fit to repeat that…unfortunate event.”

Well, he’s unlikely to like the other things they got up to and she wonders which he would have preferred. The fucking or the killing?

Elegantly crossing his ankle over his knee, looking like a perfect portrait of lordly grace, the Darkling gazes off at the darkened windows before glancing back at Alina. “He’s opted to have my *Oprichniki* take on a greater role in guarding you. Why might that be?”

Relief and fury intermix like a storm front inside of Alina at those words. Ivan’s casting her aside? Just like that? Stepping away, giving up responsibility? Whatever happened to his ironclad sense of duty? “…and you’re allowing him to do so?”

Her voice sounds very, very unamused, no matter how hard she tries to mask it.

“Oh, he’s still *very much* in charge of your protection. Don’t worry.” He says the last bit with a mocking lilt. “But he thinks you’ll behave well enough that even my *Oprichniki* can escort you to most affairs and places around the grounds.”

Alina barks out a sharp, nasty little laugh that shocks even her. “Is that so? *Well*. I’m thrilled he has so much faith in me. He must be getting senile.”

At this, a flash of amusement slithers across Aleksander’s face. He always looks kinder when he smiles. “That’s…certainly one way of looking at it. But I very much doubt it’s true. He’s as sharp as ever.” He sits up straighter and steeples his fingers on the tabletop. “No, I like this better. I need him focused on…other things.”

*Other things*. Like interrogation. Executing spies or any Drüskelle that somehow make it across where the Fold is currently blocking the Fjerdan border. Returning to being the Head of the *Corporalki* organization. Yes, Ivan has a lot of *other things* to be doing for Aleksander.

These thoughts bring forth darker things. Alina licks her lips and asks carefully, “Will we be discussing the nature of my return?”

“Tonight? Heavens no.” The servants come and clear away their plates as Aleksander watches her from across the table. “Why would I want us to discuss something so sensitive? You’ve only just come back to me.”

“It sounds like you are insinuating that I won’t like what you have planned for Ravka. This does not fill me with warm, fuzzy feelings, Aleksander.” Alina says in a cold tone, her eyes boring holes into him.

With animal grace, he rises up from his seat at the table and comes to her side, helping her up from her chair. His eyes soften and he brushes the back of his knuckles against her cheekbone. “Alina. Please. Not tonight.”

Is he begging her? Begging her to pretend that she doesn’t hate what he stands for, what he’s done to them and everyone around them?

Their word games slide across their tongues.

Alina utters, “You know what I want.” *I want the Fold destroyed.*

“Sometimes, we don’t always get what we desire.” *I’m aware and I don’t care.*

Giving him a grim, thin-lipped smile, Alina replies, “Famous last words. I will have what I want, one way or another, Aleks. Eventually, all things must *change*.”

The expression on his face is cool and confident, as if he enjoys the thought of a challenge, as long as he’s certain that he’ll be victorious. The Darkling leans down and presses his cheek to hers. “Will you stay with me tonight?” He utters the words softly against her neck, one of his hands coming up to press against her amplifier.

Immediately, Alina feels her power leap upwards to greet him, against her will and out of her control. It’s a strange mix of euphoria, from the power coursing through her fluidly, and yet it’s tainted by revulsion, knowing how he’s able to pull this reaction from her.

Because, he’s enslaved her and she cannot control how her power and body reacts to him.

She has *no choice*.

Her skin prickles with sharp awareness as his lips brush her skin, the feeling of his perfectly manicured facial hair against her throat. Alina gasps and hates herself as she tilts her head to give him more access.

“I’m sure you know how tired I am from travel,” she whispers, closing her eyes, not wanting to see a damn thing.

“I know.” His arms snake around her, the soft scent of his sandalwood cologne filling her senses. “I just want to hold you. Nothing more. I’ve missed the smell of your hair and the way you look at dawn.”

As always, his words are *lovely*, so utterly convincing, and he’s drawing her in with honey instead of force. She knows that the honey only lasts as long as her good behavior does.

That much is clear.

“Stay with me,” he breathes, like a dream.

…and because she's weak and her heart aches, she *does*. Ivan has left a horrible emptiness inside of her and she wants to be held, wants to be in someone's arms, even if that someone is Aleksander, who she knows will use her for evil deeds.

He at least keeps his word; he holds her sweetly, kissing her hair, telling her how pleased he is that she's safe and well. Alina can almost close her eyes and pretend she's in another room, in another part of the country, being held until she falls asleep.

A near moment of innocence for two people who have done very terrible things.

~*~

In the morning, when she leaves his bed chamber, exiting into the long hallway, she passes Ivan, who doesn't even look at her. He *does* snap his shoulder into hers as he passes, making Alina want to punch him in the kidney.

Despite that, it still feels like a knife in her chest, twisting. Betrayal and sorrow are terrible friends, when paired with a broken heart. She wants him to look her in the eye and see the damage he's caused.

Alina grits her teeth and tries to not feel ashamed of herself, even though she did *nothing to be ashamed of*.

---

---

A few nights later, she makes a point of going out to the cemetery.

She has to slip her *Oprichniki*, because she has no desire for them to observe her talking to a dead man. It's only been two days, but Alina knows the pair of gentlemen already think she's off her rocker, just a bit.

Up to her old tricks, at least, the less vicious ones, Alina escapes through her windows and makes her way into the night, the *Oprichniki* none the wiser to the fact that she's not in her room.

With a wine bottle and lantern in hand, she roves through the dark, past rows and rows of gravestones until she comes to the one with the name *Fedyor Kaminsky*. The air is thick with the smell of dirt and earth, cold.

Alina sits down next to it, her back against the cool stone, speaking amicably to the long dead heartrender as if he can respond to her. "*Hey*. I'm back. I've missed your pretty face. Which I'm sure you're aware of." She takes a big sip from her wine, thinking. She loves the peacefulness of the night air, the owls hooting in the distance.

"Things got weird, while we were away. Which, you *also* probably know, wherever you are now. We hate each other again, so, I guess we're back to the status quo. He's been pretending

I don't exist. He won't look at me." She sighs, pushing back her hurt and anger at Ivan. "You should also know that you were an absolute saint for putting up with him. I don't know how you did it and managed to have a smile brighter than my sunlight."

She smiles weakly, thinking of Fedyor and his lovely face, his kindhearted demeanor. Placing a hand on the gravestone, she sighs. "When he and I finally kick the bucket, I'm handing him straight over to you, like *right away*. You owe me one, because taking care of him was a nightmare." Her face goes serious. "I don't think I can keep my promise to you though, about keeping an eye on him while you're gone. I don't think…I just can't. I can't, Fedyor. It hurts too much. *I'm sorry*. I'm good at letting people down."

Tears prick at her eyes and she pinches the bridge of her nose, trying to control her emotions. Betrayal hurts and she can't help but spend her nights wondering if she ever meant anything to Ivan at all.

She pours some wine on the grass and mutters, "In case you're thirsty. That one was your favorite, wasn't it?"

Only silence greets her, so she sips again.

---

---

She's been waiting patiently for days for Aleksander to unveil why he's called her back. Perhaps patiently isn't the proper term; *nervously* is probably more apt. There's no conceivable way that he summoned her just because he missed her.

Of course not. He must have a use for her, and if he does, he's taking his sweet time telling her about it. Instead, he spends time introducing her to some of the newer recruits that have been accepted into their orders while she was gone, tries to make the most of her seemingly tolerable temperament.

They often have dinner together, though they haven't actually consummated their reunion. He's waiting for her to make a move on him, which is also a *very* Aleksander thing to do. He reminds her of a wolf spider; waiting patiently for some unsuspecting prey to simply walk into his trap, waiting to consume them.

Any time he brings up Ivan is like a hot poker in her eye, or a knife buried in her gut. The heartrender has still been pretending she doesn't exist, as if she's some sort of very uninteresting shrubbery. It *hurts* that he won't even *look at her*.

Alina can't determine if she's angry because he seems to be unaffected by their brutal separation…or because she allowed herself to feel so attached to him in the first place.

~*~

It's almost worse when they actually, quite by accident, make eye contact in the training yard.

He's surrounded by a group of *Corporalki*, explaining some sort of theory or technique, what does Alina bloody know, and just seeing him demonstrate a few sharp movements makes her heart leap up stupidly. It's her own stupid mistake that she likes the way he uses his hands, sees the strength in them, likes the feel of them on her body-

She remembers what his strong hands feel like on her hips, digging into her thighs. The way his teeth feel against her neck, the way his rough voice sounds when-

He stops talking midsentence and his eyes swing in her direction, freezing. His throat works and his jaw clenches, something flashing through his eyes as he truly meets her gaze for the first time in days. It feels like the world just bleeds away and Alina wants to do numerous things to him, bad, good, she can't decipher herself anymore, doesn't understand what she *feels*.

All she knows is that her traitorous body still wants *him* and that's absolutely *offensive*.

Ivan takes a step forward and Alina takes one backward, feeling like flying apart. For a very brief second, it feels like if she runs, he'll chase. Her breathing shifts, heart fluttering. Her belly heats with the possibilities, of things she shouldn't be thinking of-

One of the junior heartrenders raises his hand nervously, saying, "Sir?"

The spell breaks. Ivan straightens his spine and returns his attention to the group of junior heartrenders surrounding him like lost, yet dangerous ducklings.

Alina leaves the training yard and ducks around the next wall, covering her face with her hands.

*He gave you up. You mean nothing to him. How can you still look at him and want him?*

Self-loathing tastes like ash on her tongue.

---

---

Karyna seems to be the healer that Alina's *Oprichniki* have chosen to care for her, managing the outcomes of her destructive, yet quiet outbursts of emotion. As days pass, she sees more of the younger woman.

Which, probably isn't a healthy thing.

"*Why* are you like this?" The healer asks, not for the first time, as she heals some new injury that Alina has self-inflicted. "You're the Sun Summoner!"

"*Ha*. I'm the Sun Summoner? What does that even mean? That I'm supposed to be happy all the time? Sunshine and flowers? Don't make me ill," Alina replies. She winces as her skin begins to knit together.

With blue eyes, the healer glances upward from the deep slice Alina has put into her upper thigh. “You’re the most valued Grisha in the whole Second Army.”

Alina tilts her head to the side and pushes her hair back, exposing her neck. “Take a good look, because it’s the only time I’m going to let you stare. This is what I am. I am chained to the Darkling. You cannot know what that’s like.” *And no one can know that I plan to change it. I plan to take it back.*

Karyna does indeed stare with surprise and vague horror in her eyes. She must be wondering if it still hurts. “…and that’s the reason for all of this drama? Wouldn’t you rather just…do you…do you need someone to talk to? Instead of causing yourself more pain?”

“The physical pain makes my emotional pain go away. Temporarily. Which is why I have you to fix me up and make me *all better*,” Alina says with a thin smile. “Also, I’m only valued for as long as I *behave*. My good behavior comes with a price, dear.”

The healer frowns at her, barely able to remove her gaze from the collar made of antler. “Were you always this much trouble for Ivan? You were in his protective custody these past few years, weren’t yo-”

*Protective what?*

She doesn’t want to hear some slip of a child bringing him up to her *again*.

Alina can feel the way her eyes flash with a certain ugliness, the sound of his name burning like a brand in her chest. She stands up and knocks her chair over, pulling her robe about herself with a hiss of anger. “I don’t recall mentioning I wanted my business looked into. You’re here to heal injuries; *nothing else*.”

Karyna gapes at her in shock, hand to her chest, eyes wide in confusion.

Alina stares her down with dark eyes and dares her to bring up the way her heart jumped over Ivan’s name, dares her to say a damn word.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t…I didn’t mean to pry…” the girl whispers. “I only know that he was guarding you-”

Sitting down with a pathetic sigh, Alina covers her face and tells herself that it isn’t the healer’s fault. She gestures to her leg. “Just…finish fixing this. Make sure it doesn’t scar. Aleksander doesn’t like scars.”

The other woman swallows thickly, unable to meet her gaze for a reason that Alina cannot quite figure out. “Of course.”

She sees him out her window, one lonely night. There's a lone figure in red standing at Fedyor's grave and Alina knows it's Ivan even without being able to see him perfectly from the distance. She just *knows*.

Her heart aches, a hollow, sick feeling. Not for the first time, she feels ashamed for the way she treated him on the day that Fedyor was laid to rest, the way she used his pain as a tool to try and end her own misery.

They still haven't even spoken to each other, since their return.

Even though she knew all this time that he's Aleksander's right-hand man and always will be, she still feels betrayed every time she catches sight of him at the Darkling's side, the two of them chatting as if nothing has changed. Ivan outwardly seems like his usual self; his insides aren't all torn up, missing her.

She feels betrayed and yet, Alina knows it's her own stupidity. Somehow, deep inside, she'd wanted him to forget his loyalty to Aleksander.

She should have known that would *never* happen. Maybe, if she had been smarter, she wouldn't be in this situation. If Alina had just assumed he would always hand her over, without a fight, maybe this wouldn't have hurt so bad.

Like being stabbed in the heart, repeatedly.

The sad, lonely little girl inside of her wants to go to him and beg for comfort, an end to her pain. Her pride won't let her.

Even now, she watches as his head bows over the grave, a subtle sign of misery and she feels her heart screaming at her to go stand by him and hold his hand, to comfort him at the grave of his dead lover, the man she knows he loved more than life itself, a man she loved as well-

But no. She won't go to him. He made his choice and she will not throw herself at his feet. Aleksander is the only one she has the patience for when it comes to genuflection, and that's mainly because she *must*.

Ivan's broken her too deeply for her to give in to what she feels. So, she clings hard to feeling raw and hateful towards him, even as she feels sorrow and yearning.

---

---

During the fourth week of her return, Aleksander decides to demonstrate her power to a group of military investors from around Ravka. There is no direct conversation around what the intended push is going to be, but Alina has her suspicions.

Aleksander's been so tight lipped about what she *knows* must be coming, but she suspects that he enjoys her being *nice* to him far too much to ruin it. Every time she presses, every

time she asks, he deflects, always with, *why trouble yourself with such unpleasant things, love?*

*Because you're going to make me do them,* she wants to scream, wants to pick up the damn candelabra and throw it across the room.

Even though she gained so much control of her own power while off in Western Ravka, the display of power to the Ravkan investors is a terrible reminder of how much control Aleksander still has over Alina's small science.

A very terrible reminder.

His hand, firmly digging into her shoulder, her grotesque collar on display, *the way everyone stares at her.* The way that Ivan doesn't, from the Darkling's other side, just a few feet from her.

There are gasps and sounds of awe as Aleksander calls forth her strength, filling the room with an all-encompassing light, growing ever brighter and larger in size. Sunlight so thick, one can almost taste it, like a Sunday morning glass of orange juice, fresh and sharp.

It feels wrong. She couldn't even take back control if she wanted to, feeling him overpowering her, the stench of his dark power cloaking her like sin itself.

Afterwards, as the investors slowly disperse, talking amongst themselves, drinking and laughing, Aleksander turns Alina to face him. "Will you come to me tonight?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the way Ivan's head tilts towards them, listening. She can almost imagine him grinding his teeth, wondering what she'll say. He's already come to his own conclusions from their first night back, she's certain, even though she did nothing but sleep beside Aleks.

As if Ivan has any right to be angry about who shares her bed. He gave up his place on a fucking silver platter.

Now, *now* she can feel Ivan looking at her. Now, she has his attention. It's unfortunate for him that she's feeling bloodthirsty.

She tilts her head upward, meeting Aleksander's gaze, saying evasively, "I'll consider it."

*You could have had this,* she hopes projects directly at Ivan, without her even glancing at him. *You chose to throw me away.*

When she steps away, excusing herself back to her room, she ignores Ivan's very pointed stare, because now he wants her to look at him.

So, she won't.

~*~

Afterwards, her night is full of strife, spinning with thoughts of the Fold, sitting at the edge of Fjerda, hating that still, despite everything, her power still belongs to the Darkling. Alina doesn't go to Aleksander; she never had any intention of it tonight after that dreadful display of his control of her.

Instead, she tosses and turns in the darkness of her own suite.

*She dreams of Fjerda.*

*The Fold marches forward, consuming the entire border of Fjerda, and then the entire continent, consuming everyone in sight. Alina closes her eyes and tries to not listen to the screams.*

*She can't save them. No one can.*

*The Darkling wields her power with ease.*

*Her nightmare is full of the volcra and people screaming.*

*Guilt consumes her.*

*Zoya stands beside her, eyes accusing. "You can make this stop."*

---

---

She avoids the Darkling for a few days after that, her unpleasant, wrathful feelings just under her skin. When she finally feels calm enough to engage with him again, she approaches him in his receiving room, well lit and built out with his gigantic war table.

"How about a ride today?" Alina asks lightly. She needs the fresh air, the wind in her hair and in her face.

Aleksander's scowling over some maps, seeming lost in thought, but he looks up in surprise when she asks him. He seems pleased and distraught by her request.

There are pawns set off to the side of his war map, likely representing unmoved regiments and squads of the First and Second Army. Perhaps he hasn't decided where he wants to place them.

Before he can answer her, Alina finds something curious on his map. "What's going on there?" She points her finger down at a section somewhere north of Os Alta. There's military presence, along with a squad of Fabrikators. Unusual, for them to be in the field.

Smoothly, Aleksander picks up her hand from the map and presses it to his lips, eyes shadowed with hidden thoughts. "Nothing for you to worry about at the moment. Just a new project."

Alina frowns at him, not liking the sound of that whatsoever. “What project?”

With swift intent, he slides the conversation away. “About that ride-”

“I want to know about your mysterious, possibly evil project, Aleksander.”

He brushes his mouth over her forehead, smiling slightly at the sight of her scowling up at him fiercely. “I can’t go with you today. I have a lot on my mind. I’m sorry, *printsessa*.”

It must be bad, if he’s calling her pet names. But also, because he’s denying her something that makes her happy; getting out of the Palace.

Alina’s face falls, partially because he’s not going to tell her what he’s up to and partially because if he doesn’t ride with her, she’s technically *not allowed* to go gallivanting across the land. It’s something, back in the day, that Fedyor would have gotten in serious trouble over, because he would take her *often*, when he wasn’t supposed to.

She must look suitably downtrodden, because Aleksander sighs, seemingly torn as he runs his eyes across her face, as if memorizing her. His eyes are like dark pools, unendingly deep. “I want to trust you,” he whispers to Alina.

Alina knows he does. She knows that he wants to trust her more than anything in the world, but she’s pretty sure they are both way beyond trusting one another with *anything*. He manipulated her when she was young, made her believe she loved him, *that he loved her*, *that she was special*, that he meant to do good for the world, to save Ravka.

He trusted that she would adore him so much that she would never question his plans for the Fold. He never anticipated his mother spilling all his dark secrets to her, sending Alina from his side, horrified by his evil intent, his desire for power. *Her power*.

How he ever believed that Alina wouldn’t find out, she’ll never know.

“I could take Ilya and Edik,” she finds herself saying. She’ll beg if she has to, but she needs out of this place; she needs to breathe. Her mind constantly twists and turns over unpleasant things, driving her ever closer to behaving recklessly. “It’s just a simple ride. I’ll even promise to be back before dinner. Before the sun even sets.”

Still holding her gaze intensely, Aleksander rubs a long tress of her hair between his fingers thoughtfully. “Take them both and be careful.”

Alina *forces* a smile onto her face, *because gratitude*, and makes to leave the room.

His voice catches up to her from where he stands beside is incomplete war table. “Alina. Don’t ride too fast.”

*What is he, my father? Good grief, it’s just a ride.*

She scoffs as she exits the chamber; she’s not sure how he functions, constantly worrying about her and how he’s going to maintain power for all eternity.

~*~

“Are you sure you want to ride that one?” Alina asks skeptically, eyeing the snappy way Ilya’s horse seems to dance around, head held high, snorting roughly, tail swishing back and forth. She looks back to the stable. “Maybe you should swap to a less fresh mount.”

The *Oprichniki* gives her a serious look, his hands tight on the reins as he fights to keep the horse under control. “We need fresh horses in case you decide you want to be chased.”

Is that so? Well, Edik isn’t on some awfully fresh beast that looks like it wants to jump a house, but what does Alina know?

Alina gives her guard a very dead look, because he *cannot* be serious about thinking she’s going to try and outrun them. Someone has been telling some old stories, about her scooting out windows. Well, she still does that, but not with the intent of running away and becoming *a nun*.

“Well. It’s your funeral,” she replies, gently nudging her own mount towards the riding paths.

The day is absolutely lovely, not to warm, not too cold. The feel of the horse smoothly cantering beneath her with even-paced strides brings a smile to Alina’s face. There’s nothing like it, nothing that helps clear her mind more than riding across the countryside.

It feels like freedom, even if she’s never quite free. Not like she was, only weeks ago.

Through the trees, the valleys, and hills they go, Alina grinning the whole way. Who needs Aleksander when she can have this to herself? Sure, her guards are terrible company, but she doesn’t need to speak to anyone-

It’s amazing, how quickly a simple ride out can turn into sheer disaster.

While they’re giving their mounts a brief break, standing at the top of one of the green hills, Illya’s horse goes stock still, head going up high as a kite, like some sort of giraffe instead of a steed. The horse starts blowing roughly, staring off at something in the trees.

“That one spooks bad when he’s fresh,” Edik mutters to Illya. “I’d keep him thinking about work before he-”

It’s too late. One moment, all horses are fine, the next, Illya’s horse screams, eyes going wide, leaping sideways thoughtlessly into Alina’s mount, ploughing hard into its hindquarters. It’s like a series of bad events, Alina’s horse bucking violently in response, throwing her off balance in her saddle, losing one stirrup in the process.

She yelps, trying to maintain control, but her horse spins on its hindquarters and *bolts,* yanking hard on the bit, nearly pulling Alina forward. The problem is, unstable as she is, Alina goes over, praying, *lose both stirrups, throw me loose, throw me loose-*

Her boot is caught in the last stirrup and she doesn’t come loose, instead feeling the sensation of being hit by a sledge hammer as her horse’s front leg slams into her where she hangs. Then, it happens again.

She's being *dragged*, and panic mixes with adrenaline as Alina tries to get her boot loose. She can't hear, can barely think, vision going blurry. Everything's out of control. *This is how I die,* she vaguely finds herself thinking.

Alina has no idea how far she ends up being dragged by the stirrup and horse, but eventually she's shaken loose, hearing everything in her body crunch as she finally comes free, feeling agony in her body *everywhere*.

When she finally hits the ground, everything goes black for a moment.

Alina's eyes blink open and she finds herself wondering why she's on the floor and why Edik is hovering over her. She feels disoriented. Edik is saying, "Sankta, can you hear me? Tell me what hurts."

Pain is everywhere.

"Did she go under the hooves?" Illya asks anxiously from where he's still on his anxious mount. "How bad is it? Is she concussed?"

Edik waves him off irritably. Alina tries to focus on him, but everything *hurts*. "I'm…I'll be fine," she utters out hoarsely. Had she been screaming?

Her guard looks ill. Why does he look so pale? "Can you sit up?" He asks, eyes holding hers steadily. "We have to get you back to the Little Palace."

She has no choice, does she? She needs help and fast.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll-" She tries to sit up, but it doesn't….it doesn't quite work and a sharp pain slices through her warningly.

It feels like her insides are trying to fall out.

Edik comes closer. "Here. Come. I'll help you sit up…"

"Okay, just, *oh, no no no* ***stop-***" Alina lets out a high-pitched sound of pain, feeling as if something inside of her just *isn't together*, combined with the stinging sensation in her ribcage, getting worse with each breath. Edik gently lowers her back onto the ground, flat, her hair spread around her like a halo.

"Can you pick her up and get her on my horse with me?" Illya asks, his horse pawing violently at the ground.

Edik looks up, face pale and stony. "I don't think we can move her, Illya."

"*Der'mo*."

"I'll stay with her," Edik says warily. "Go back and get Karyna. Tell her that she'll need to bring help. It's bad. *Very* bad."

Alina hears the roaring of hooves as Illya uses his extremely, stupidly fresh horse to gallop back to the Little Palace. She moans weakly, staring upward at the grey sky. “I told him, *I bloody told him* to get a different mount!”

“I know.” Edik squeezes her hand. “He can’t be feeling too good about himself right now.”

“How bad is it? Is anything…does anything look unnatural?” She asks weakly.

“You’ll be fine, just…keep calm.” Edik is amazingly calm for a man who is alone with a seriously injured woman.

Panic eventually begins to settle in, along with even more pain as adrenaline fades from Alina’s body. She starts whimpering weakly. “It’s getting worse. The pain is getting worse. *Help*. I don’t feel good.”

Edik looks pained himself, stroking her forehead as soothingly as he can. “*Shhh. Shh*. It’s okay. Don’t breathe like that, you’ll start hyperventilating…easy, girl…”

Minutes pass, excruciating minutes upon minutes until Alina is nearly ready to beg him to put her out of her misery.

“No, I’m not going to put you down like a lame horse. Where do you come up with such things? *Look*. Help is already nearly here. You’ll be fine, just hang on,” Edik says soothingly.

Turning her head slightly, Alina sees four riders in the distance; the overwhelming majority of them in crimson. “Should’ve just let me die,” she whimpers pathetically.

Moments later, the first rider reaches them, Karyna, dismounting quickly, falling to her knees next to Alina. She looks pale and nervous, holding her hands over Alina’s body. “You poor dear,” the young healer whispers.

The next healer, more senior in age and standing, dismounts next and makes a few gestures with her hands, doing rough diagnostics. Her face pinches. “Karyna, you’ll take on the fractured ribs. There’s a few of them. Some serious bruising to her organs. There’s a bulging disk in her spine that’ll need fixing and her bruising is severe. She must have gone under the hooves. I’ll begin on her pelvis; it’s cracked bad. We’ve got our jobs cut out for us.”

“It’s *what?*” Alina almost gags, feeling nausea rising up inside of her, panic swirling around in her head like a tornado. Her whimpers increase in pitch, like some sort of beaten dog.

“Want me to start, Olga?” Karyna asks anxiously, her hands starting to shake.

Everything is spinning, getting hazy as Alina’s vision gets starry. Her breathing is coming fast and hard, panic overrunning her, chest hurting. It feels like she’s breathing through a straw and she’s suffocating. “How will I walk? How *can I walk*-”

The older woman shakes her head, ignoring Alina, still only speaking to Karyna. “She’s already in too much pain and going into shock. This is bad enough that it’s going to hurt while we fix her. I need him to keep her calm and ease her pain.” She looks over her shoulder, yelling towards the remaining two arrivals. “Hurry up! I need her stabilized *now*.”

Looking like some wrathful lord, Ivan dismounts from his horse and storms over to where everyone has surrounded Alina. His eyes meet hers and he really looks at her for the first time in days and days and Alina's heart flutters sadly.

She's in too much pain to keep her emotions to herself.

Ivan looks down at her, his gaze dark with something she doesn't understand, his jaw working, as if he's trying to keep his emotions off his face. Then, he slits a nasty look towards Illya, saying, "I ought to have you stripped of your rank for this. You fool."

Illya goes red, looking chastised, stepping away from the scene of the crime, giving the Grisha room to work on their severely injured Sun Summoner.

"I need you to calm her down," Olga says sternly, eyeing Ivan. "She's getting worse."

Wordlessly, he makes a few strong gestures with his hands, shoving his strength into Alina, dipping under her skin as if he's coming home. She feels him, instantly, knows his touch even as the two other *Corporalki* begin to work on her with their own small sciences.

Karyna is sweating, trembling. Without Olga assisting her, there's no way she would have been able to heal Alina alone.

Even with Ivan numbing her pain and calming her, Alina still whimpers, hearing the unnerving sounds of bones cracking and shifting, melding back into place, the feeling of pressure growing around her entire body. It still hurts-

She gasps weakly, closing her eyes, trying not to cry, because she hates looking weak in front of Ivan. "It hurts," she whispers brokenly, sounding betrayed, like a small child.

"I know," he replies hoarsely, as if he's distraught by her state of injury. "I *know*."

Alina only has a moment to realize *he's talking to her* as if she's real, as if she *still means something* to him, before he presses his power into her even further. Panic and terror slowly slip away, like water through her fingers. Eventually, darkness in her vision grows, bleeding into the void. It's heavenly and Alina embraces the powerful push of Ivan's small science.

He's putting her under.

…and then she's no more.

~*~

"I'll take her, Sir…" someone faraway is saying.

A harsh voice sounds out from above Alina as she's lifted into someone's strong arms. "If you cannot manage your own horse, why would I give her to you? She rides with me."

Still out of it, fuzzy, listening to a familiar heartbeat, feeling it at her cheek, Alina drifts. At least the pain is gone, the burning, agonizing pain. She's distantly aware that she's curled up in another person's lap, the casual snort of a horse beneath her once again.

Feeling the sway of the animal, Alina fades out, the world going black…

…returning to consciousness is a slow thing, her eyes blinking open tiredly. Even Alina's tongue feels heavy in her mouth and she considers that this is what it feels like to be completely rolled over by a heartrender's power. It's been sometime since she's been put out like this. Truly, utterly put out.

She's being carried, like some sort of stupid, helpless little shrubbery, but she likes these arms. It's Ivan, carrying her to her suite and the familiar scent of him fills her nose, leaving her inhaling deeply, pleased that her ribs aren't complaining anymore, she's missed him so much, she adores him-

Reality hits. *Ivan*.

"Put me down," she mutters with slight coherency. "Put me down, you brute."

"No," he replies without heat.

Alina squirms in his grasp, hating that everyone is going to see him carting her around like she's a useless child instead of a woman, but he only holds her tighter to his chest. Gritting her teeth hatefully, at him, at herself, Alina sags in his arms.

When they reach her suite, he gently sets her down on her bed, as if she's still injured and terribly breakable. When Ivan starts taking her riding boots off for her, kneeling on the ground, Alina looks at the far wall, hating the way her heart races. "I can take my own boots off."

"Be quiet."

"I will not!" Alina snaps. "You *cannot* put me to bed like some sort of imbecile!"

"Your body needs rest." When her final boot flops onto the ground, Ivan rises to his feet, towering over her. He's looking down at her with a purposely empty expression. "You could have died."

It was that bad, wasn't it? Of course it was; she'd felt like dying, right then and there, in the grass. She wants to know if he'd even care if she died, and then she remembers Aleksander-

"Don't tell him," She pleads, suddenly feeling stricken. "Please, don't tell him I got hurt while riding out."

An unpleasant expression crosses Ivan's face, as if he doesn't like that she's even brought up Aleksander in the first place. "How many secrets from him do you want me to carry around for you?"

His meaning hits her harder than a hammer stroke and Alina flushes, suddenly feeling naked in front of him. "I never asked you to keep any secrets for me. In fact, are you certain you don't want to compare notes with him? Seems like a thing the two of you would do."

Ivan looks like she's slapped him, his eyes like knives. "Sometimes, I can't believe the shit that comes out of your mouth."

"Don't act like you care," Alina grouses weakly, no energy in her body whatsoever. "You *never* cared about me at all."

His jaw tightens and his eyes narrow. "Do you even listen to yourself?"

"I don't need to. I know what you did. You gave me back to him, like a pig to be slaughtered-"

He slams her under so hard that she doesn't even realized it's happened.

~*~

It's late when Karyna knock on Alina's doors and visits her, looking worn. "I wanted to check in on you. How are you feeling?"

Truthfully? "A little drugged, actually."

The healer comes forward and pulls a chair up beside Alina's bedside. Her small lips quirk as she presses the back of her hand to Alina's forehead, taking her temperature. "Ivan really wanted you to be comfortable."

"Actually, he was mad at me," Alina drawls. "You look like hell, by the way."

"Thanks, it took a lot out of me to heal the damage you sustained," Karyna replies a little dryly. "Why on earth do you think he was mad at you? That man was nervous like a butterfly-"

"Oh, please," Alina groans, rolling her eyes unsuccessfully. "He was indifferent."

Karyna squints at her with slight amusement. "Ah, well, you see, I'm the *Corporalki* here. I think I know what I'm talking about." She checks Alina's vitals. "Oh. He did put you out again."

"I *told* you. I said somethings. He said some things." Alina flops her hand vaguely. "Talking about feelings makes him do his disappearing act. *Poof.* Night night Alina. *Every time*."

The healer looks at her in disbelief. "You really are different when you're relaxed." She pauses. "I know it's none of my business-"

"Then why are you bringing it up?" Alina asks with exasperation. "Seriously. Do not. There are some things…you cannot…bring up. Not in this place."

"But, about you and him…"

"There is no me and him."

Karyna purses her lips and swallows. “Fine. I just thought you should know that the *Corporalki* know things, okay? We aren’t…we aren’t blind to things that people would rather we not see. Do you get what I’m saying? People are *going* to notice.”

Alina feels a hint of dread pool in her belly, as if she just dropped forty feet.

“See. I just felt how that made you feel. Anxious.”

“Stop spying on me!” Alina says waspishly, still feeling thrown for a loop. Are the *Corporalki* really starting to wonder about her relationship with Ivan? Saints, how did she not even think of this.

The younger woman sighs, her light brown hair falling over her apple-shaped face. “I don’t mean to. I’m just trying to help you understand that if the wrong person notices…”

Alina swallows thickly. She understands where this is going.

If the wrong person with the wrong agenda finds out, the Darkling will be the first to know.

She hardens her feelings and her expression. “There’s nothing for anyone to notice.”

“If you say so.”

---

---

The anger she’s been carrying for him tastes like ash in her mouth, as the days drag on. In short, the rage is dying, the fire gutting out inside of her.

Which is a terrible thing, because it leaves her with an empty void, one that she wants to fill.

Because, despite herself, she *misses* Ivan. *Terribly*. So much that she wakes up missing him in the mornings when she’s alone…and even when she’s not.

…and once she realizes that, it makes her sad enough to sit in her tub and sob silently, hating herself for her own weakness for him.

Why can’t she forget him, pretend what they had never was? Every though of him, every memory, is like a painful thorn digging into her skin.

---

---

During the third month of her return, Aleksander hosts a grand party for Alina. There are so many new Grisha at the Little Palace, many of whom have never seen her before. All are eager to lay their eyes on a living legend.

The Darkling’s Sun Summoner.

Her dance card, *not that she bloody wants one*, is full of names that she doesn't recognize and that is sheer madness all on its own. She has been man-handled more times than she can count, leaving her wondering if this new generation even knows what the word 'respect' means.

*Gah*. She's such an old woman.

When she escapes her most current dance partner, Alina makes her way to the far side of the ballroom, intending to hide for a few moments. She needs a break, she's practically sweating from being spun around the entire room, and her face hurts from grinning falsely at *everyone*.

Leaning against the wall for a brief respite, Alina grabs a glass of water from a server that passes by and presses it to her forehead, enjoying the cold against her heated flesh. As she's catching her breath again, a flash of red catches in the corner of her eye.

"You're in your element," Ivan says dryly, no part of his body language remotely friendly towards her, even as he comes to stand beside her.

Typical. He goes out of his way to stand by her, only to be a dick about it. Regardless, her heart flips like a dolphin and *ugh*, she hates the way she wants to nibble his jawline.

"If you think I enjoy being passed about from guy to guy on the dancefloor, you'd be mistaken."

His scowl deepens. "I must be remembering one of your favorite hobbies from the West wrong."

Oh, of course he's making sly comments about her pub dancing. *Of course!*

"That was different. I think these Grisha are getting younger," Alina comments irritably, because there's no one else her age here and so she might as well complain to him. "How are they getting so young? And so *handsy*! Don't they know I'm an old hag?"

"You are a hag; you just don't look like one."

She frowns at him hatefully. "Ouch, *Ivan*."

"You know I hate when you whine at me like that," he replies in that rough tone that makes her stomach heat. She hates that still, even with her heart still aching and bleeding, he can manage to make her body interested in him.

He does hate whining. That's *why* she whines; he's literally the only reason she *ever* whines. *Just to irritate him.*

A young man in a blue *kefta* is making a beeline straight for Alina where she stands beside Ivan and Alina is very intrigued as to how this will play out. The young man in blue bows slightly to Alina and as he straightens back up, opens his mouth to ask her to dance, Ivan flatly says, "*No*."

The *Etherealki* boy's mouth snaps shut and he looks to Alina questioningly.

Eyes cool, Ivan stares him down disdainfully. “Don’t look at her. *I’m* the one talking to you, boy.”

Alina’s red lips purse delicately and she toys with the idea of taking the *inferni’s* hand and dancing with him, just to undercut Ivan. But, in the end, she doesn’t, choosing to indulge the foolish, heartbroken part of her that wants to be near him.

When the young man walks away with disappointment, Alina sighs dramatically. “Who will dance with me now? You?”

Ivan couldn’t sound less enthused. “Have I ever given you the impression that I’m the sort of man who dances? I’d prefer to be on the battlefront than here.”

Alina scoffs; typical. An unpleasant feeling shifts inside of her and she can’t determine if it’s all her or just a tiny bit of him rubbing off on her. “I imagine you have plenty of interrogation victims waiting for you in the dungeons. Isn’t that more your style?”

His lip curls cruelly, but he says nothing.

“I imagine you think about all the power trips you’re going to have when he summons you down to deal with those unfortunate souls.” Alina lifts her chin, her voice dropping. “I imagine that’s what keeps you lit on nights like these that you loathe. I bet it gets you *going*.”

Ivan looks down at her from the corner of his eye, his gaze going darker. “Is that what you think? You’d be wrong.” He leans down to say closer to her ear, so as not to say it where anyone else can easily hear. “You know what gets me going? On evenings like these? I like to entertain myself thinking of that night you gave me your ass. How no one had taken you there before, and how you *begged* me to be gentle with you.” He pauses briefly, gloating at the expression on Alina’s face, the way her breathing seems to catch, before he continues darkly, “I like to remember your face, and the way you cried, just a little, because you were *nervous*.”

Alina’s face is either one hundred percent pale or completely red and she has absolutely no idea. How dare he bring that up, to mock her! That was a private…delicate situation! To have it thrown in her face makes her want to knock his teeth in. Even then, shameful heat suffuses her, low in her body, his voice curling deep and dark inside of her.

It’s infuriating that he still has this effect on her, with just a few awful words.

Before she can even formulate a single coherent thought, anything to even say, Ivan sneers and his voice dips even lower. “I remember how much you liked it, even if your heartbeat told me how ashamed and dirty it made you feel. Saints, I remember you dripping straight onto our bed.” His cruel tone goes husky with something that isn’t disdain and Alina *cannot* think straight.

The way he says *our bed* almost makes her believe that they still share one. Almost.

Alina shivers, trying to pull herself together, well aware that they’re in public. Oh, and that she still hates him, that too. The many guests are spinning around on the dancefloor,

completely oblivious to the tense, verbal discussion happening at the edge of the room.

Her belly is all twisted up in memory of the night Ivan's referring to. It *meant* something, it meant she *trusted* him, and he's making it all vile and filthy and *ruining it*. He's wicked and she has only herself to blame for arming him with this material.

*He's never been on your side, stupid girl, you've always known that.*

Ivan's breath touches her neck and Alina gasps. It seems he's not done unraveling her. "… and even then, you needed more from me, so I filled your empty slit with my fingers. How many, Alina?"

"I don't know," she grits out, flushed, heated between her thighs, remembering every single detail, every emotion, how overwhelmed she felt; how overpowering he was. *Is*.

She feels like anyone that looks at her face right now will know all her secrets, will know what she let him do to her, how she was willingly his for years and years…

His smirk cuts her to the bone. "You know."

Alina can't take any more of this. It feels like her heart and soul are being ripped out, along with her intestines. She wants him, she *hates* him, and she doesn't want to feel anything for him. Not anymore. She makes to walk away from him, needing air, but his hand snakes out and grasps her wrist tightly, hidden by her *kefta* so no one can see him keeping her in place.

"You'd best answer me," he says.

His eyes are dilated, *hungry*, and Alina really hopes no one is looking at them too closely. She especially hopes that no *Corporalki* are eavesdropping on their physical states; Ivan should know better, but she can smell the *kvas* strongly on his breath.

She meets that dark gaze, falling into the yawning pits of his pupils, and answers. "Four," she hisses hatefully, red flashing over her cheekbones. She tries to yank away from him, drawing some concerned attention from nearby couples. "You are overstepping your bounds, *Corporalnik*."

He doesn't let go, damn him!

"Four," he mocks. His mouth goes above her ear again, to drive his point home. They are far too close to each other. "That's right. With my cock buried in your rear, you were practically ready to take my fist too. Does he know what a whore you are?" Ivan's voice drops and he can't hide the possessive edge in the undertone. "Do you let him do that to you?"

Alina sees crimson, bleeding across her gaze like spilled ink. He thinks he has the right to behave this way, because he's jealous? Jealous of *what*? He gave her up! He destroyed everything they were and everything they had the day he put his *Corporalki kefta* back on. The day Ivan told her it had all been a stupid fantasy of hers, that it had never been *real*.

Well, whatever he's feeling right now? That feels fucking real to Alina. If it hadn't been real, why does *he* feel this way?

Her mouth twists unpleasantly and she's utterly aware of the stares they are starting to get. People are noticing the bad aura oozing from them. "There it is. Now, I hear the jealousy in your voice."

"That's not an answer," Ivan snaps back.

Alina is five seconds away from clawing his face. Or kissing him. She's not sure which. Both, even.

She wants to hurt him the way that he's hurt her…and Alina is good at releasing her pain in terrifying ways. Alina lifts her chin, attempting to look down at him, even if she still has to look upward to meet his vicious gaze. "I don't *need* to let him do that to me. He wants me for eternity. He *adores* me. Something you wouldn't understand."

Alina fills her voice with cruelty, because nothing is as cruel as the truth. The way she says it insinuates that Ivan feels nothing for her, that he used and debased her because she meant nothing more than someone he enjoyed screwing.

For a minute, he looks shocked by her words, head jerking back as if struck. Then, his teeth flash at her, unkind. "Is that why you still get wet when you look at me? Because he adores you? Don't make me lau-"

She slaps him, the sound loud even in the ballroom. Breathing hard, eyes wild, Alina violently yanks her other wrist out of his grasp and stumbles away. "You bastard," she growls threateningly as she moves towards one of the exits, aware that everyone is watching now. "Don't follow me. *Do. Not*."

Of course, he doesn't listen.

~*~

The whispers barely wait moments.

"Is it just me or was that a seriously aggressive display?"

"I don't think I've even heard his heartrate move above sixty beats per minute before. Damn, what did she do?"

Karyna purses her lips and sips her drink, eyebrows sky high. The *Corporalki* to her left catches onto that and says, "What? What do you know?"

"Nothing." Karyna shakes her head, laughing. "*Nothing,* I'm serious."

Olga idly chews on a small finger sandwich, the senior healer gesturing with her chin towards the exit that the pair disappeared through. "He's closer to her than he lets on. Remember that day, with the horse accident? I thought he was going to kill Illya, once he saw her. I thought Illya was d-e-a-d."

One of the Fabrikator's shakes her head. "It's so creepy to me that you all can spy on how all of us feel. You *Corporalki*…" She shudders.

“Hey, it’s none of our business,” Karyna mutters, eyes darting around. “Just leave it be. Everything is speculation.”

“Oh.” Olga smiles, the wrinkles around her eyes crinkling. “Someone’s told you that before, I think. Mark my words, there’s a scandal in the works.”

~*~

The hallways are dimly lit by candlelight, allowing couples to sneak away discretely into random alcoves and corners. Alina pays none of them any attention, her entire mind focused on escaping.

She hears his footsteps catching up with her and Alina whips around, snarling, “*What did I fucking tell you?*”

Ivan corners her against the wall, saying roughly, “I wasn’t done talking to you.”

“Oh. Forgive me,” Alina says sarcastically. “Do I have your permission to leave yet? Or do I need to go down on my knees? I know how you like that.”

“I won’t say no,” he drawls huskily. “If you’re offering.”

Saints, he must be really in his drink. *Alina would bite it off*.

“Perhaps,” she loudly whispers at him in the hidden darkness. “You aren’t the loyal dog you like to think you are. At least, *not really*. Have you gotten tired of sharing your favorite bone? Is that what this is?”

His voice is flat, unamused by her needling. An ugly sneer curls his lips, even as he gazes hungrily at her mouth. “You know, I prefer your mouth when it’s not talking.”

“Oh, I feel the same way about you,” Alina replies, pushing at him roughly, enunciating each word with a shove that doesn’t move him much.

He pushes her hands off of him, crowding her up against the wall even tighter. “It didn’t take you long to crawl back into his bed, now did it? The first night, Alina. You fuc-”

She kicks him for that, satisfied when he grunts in pain. “You assume much and know very little. Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. *Maybe I was hurt and lonely*. What do you care?!”

“You think I don’t-”

The Darkling’s voice emits from the shadows, his footsteps not even echoing in the hall. “What is the meaning of this absolute stupidity?”

Alina and Ivan go silent, staring at each other, breathing hard, as if they’ve been running miles.

“Well? You’ve concerned half of my esteemed guests with your childish display. *The pair of you*.” The Darkling’s voice slithers over them, like a venomous snake, sliding through the

underbrush, unseen, yet still dangerous.

They both go still and Alina finds herself looking the best she can past Ivan to where Aleksander now stands, a shadow in the dim hallway. He holds out his hand to her, face expressionless. “Alina. Come here. Take my arm and I’ll escort you back inside. This is not the sort of behavior Grisha shoul-”

As he’s speaking, Alina tries to get around where Ivan has trapped her against the wall with his frame. She sidesteps him and tries to walk past, but Ivan reflexively grabs her arm and holds her in place, as if to say *I’m not done.*

Her heart stops, just a little and all she can think inside of her head is *Ivan, please be reasonable, he’s watching, he’s watching…*

It’s too late. Aleksander’s brow furrows and he cocks his head a bit, like a bird of prey. His eyes are where Ivan’s hand is locked on Alina’s arm, the Darkling’s mind puzzling through a series of conclusions. “Is there a problem?” Aleksander’s voice drops, low and cold, the atmosphere chilling.

Alina’s heart nearly abandons her and she mentally wills Ivan to let her go. She makes a little sound that she wished sounded more blasé’, but instead sounds nervous. “It’s just a silly argument, Aleks. He’s been drinking,” she says, as if that forgives *anything*.

She takes a quick glance at Ivan’s face and sees that he still hasn’t looked away from her and the air catches in her lungs. All she can find herself thinking is, *please don’t let him see how Ivan’s feeling, please don’t let him see, don’t don’t don’t…*

“Ivan. Give me my Sun Summoner,” The Darkling commands very slowly, every word enunciated, as if Alina hadn’t made her excuses whatsoever. As if she’s not even in the room, even if she’s the object of discussion.

The tone makes a flash of concern and fear spike hard inside of Alina, hard enough that it finally seems to snap Ivan out of his jealousy-fueled tantrum. He blinks and releases her arm quickly, stepping backwards from her. “Apologies, *moi soverenyi*. I’ve…it seems the *kvas* has gone to my head.”

They all know it’s a piss poor excuse.

“That’s a misstep that’s very unlike you, Ivan. We will discuss this another time, when you’ve cooled your head. *Dismissed*.”

Turning sharply on his heel, Ivan strides out of the hall, only giving Alina one more sharp glance.

Aleksander is watching Ivan’s retreating back, as if he doesn’t like what he’s seeing.

Alina comes to his side, squeezes his bicep, trying to distract him. “Let’s go back to the party. No need to dwell on a silly, drunken argument-”

He tilts her head upward and kisses her roughly, his tongue tasting of wine. Alina relaxes her body against his and allows him this moment of control, of asserting himself over her. The world spins for a moment and she sighs against his lips, because he *is* a nice kisser-

The Darkling slowly pulls his lips from hers, leaving barely an inch between them as he utters, "And what was the argument about, to illicit such a response?" His eyes are dark and fathomless, a pit of snakes slithering there.

Alina's trying to catch her breath, because she seems to have lost her ability to breathe. "Just…a disagreement. Really, it's stupid. Don't worry yourself about it. You know how we are, what our disagreements are like."

He presses his thumb against her lower lip, pressing inward. "Yes," Aleksander says ominously. "I do." Then, quite out of the blue, he straightens and says, "Follow me. I want to show you something."

~*~

Holding his hand, Alina tries to not feel apprehensive as they approach his chambers once more. When they pass his bedroom and war room, heading towards his backroom study, she feels even worse. "What are we going to do, have some late-night studying?" She tries to joke.

He doesn't laugh. "You'll see."

When they enter the final room, where the shadows are deep and dark, Aleksander presses his hand down unexpectedly on her shoulder, forcing her power out of her. She gasps as the room brightens with her light, revealing what he meant to show her.

Alina feels nauseous, covering her mouth, as if to hold in a scream.

In horror, she looks at the walls, seeing the maps that had been commissioned, year after year. Everything in her hand. Every stroke of the pencil and pen, on display. "It was you," she breathes out in horror. "All along."

"Naturally." His fingers brush idly across the top of the table as he paces slowly through the room, like a panther. Eyes only for her.

"You truly mean to do it. To completely cover Fjerda with the Fold." She sounds so faint, so sick. Her hands are shaking.

"I do."

"But, why?" Then, a terrifying thought stops her. "Were you spying on me while I lived in West Ravka?"

Aleksander scoffs scathingly. "Even I am not so obsessive. No, your *privacy* was safe. It was enough for me to know you were still happily doing your map work, year after year, in the very same place. It was my way of knowing you were safe- and hopefully happy. I never sent anyone to spy on you."

Now, he pauses, picking up a book from his desk. “And, why would I have needed a spy? You were with my right-hand. Who better than to watch you?” His voice drifts, like a cold winter wind, pushing snow. “*Who better?*”

Something turns icy, the atmosphere seemingly growing darker. His shadows, growing, crawling over the walls like spiders, eating away at the corners of her light.

Alina doesn’t know where he’s leading this conversation. First, the maps. The confirmed threat of moving the Fold over all of Fjerda. Now…now she’s not sure where he’s going with this conversation. Her mind makes multiple leaps and when she reaches the final, most terrible one, he says, “In the end, I’ve been made a fool of again. I thought you both had been acting unusual since your return, but I couldn’t quite pinpoint the reason for it. But, now I know. *Now I see*.”

*Oh. Oh no…*

His eyes are on her as he lifts an idle glass from a table to his lips. There’s something coiling in his gaze, something unpleasant. Seeking and clawing. When he places the glass down, Aleksander says very calmly, “You’ve shared his bed. Now, tell me a lovely, convincing lie, Alina. *Tell me I’m wrong*.”

The words are like a sucker punch to the gut and his eyes are like knives.

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** Comments and kudos are loved!!

OMG. This chapter was so long T.T I'm so sorry.

EDIT: Also, I really need to release my playlist for this fic XD

# Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> **AN:** Umm...😈❤ I don't know what happened here. *sits down and twiddles thumbs like a naughty girl should*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The words are like a sucker punch to the gut, like having all the air forcefully stolen from her lungs by a vicious hand, but Alina does her best to seem unfazed. Angry, horrified, feeling something very old and clawed growing inside of her, Alina does the only thing she can think of. She turns on her heel and storms out of the hideous room, full of hideous things. No, she wants to look at his stupid war room table.

She wants to *rip it to shreds until her fingernails break and bleed*.

She hears him follow after her, hot on her heels, just as she knew he would.

His voice is cool and unamused, curling up behind her like smoke. “Nothing to say for yourself, Alina?”

There’s some special *kvas* decanting on Aleksander’s elegant bar cart, beside the table built for strategy and playing with lives. She angrily pours herself a glass. “What would you *like* me to say? What do you want to hear from my lips?”

Something ugly flickers in his eyes. “The truth would be acceptable.”

Alina presses her lips together tightly, avoiding his piercing, all-seeing gaze. She tilts her head back and takes a huge, unrefined gulp from the crystal glass in her hand. “The truth,” she utters. She laughs a little bitterly. “When have you ever given me the truth? And why should I give it to you?”

Slow and measured, Aleksander steps into her line of sight. “Because. You. Are. *Mine*.”

At those words, all she sees is murder and blood crashing across her vision. In a vicious, sweeping gesture, Alina wipes half of the intricately carved pawns right off the war table, sending the pieces flying in all directions. “I *reject* that statement,” she snarls, feeling like her insides are ablaze.

His mouth goes into a dangerously thin line, eyes flickering over the ruination of his battlefield setup. “You can reject it all you want; it doesn’t make it any less true. *Answer me*, Alina.”

Now, she chuckles spitefully, tilting her head in a mocking fashion. She takes her time, pouring herself more *kvas*, then gestures with the fine crystal glass in her hand. "*I* didn't share his bed."

She allows the words to float in the air between them, boiling in the ocean of tension.

Aleksander waits, eyes like dark pools of anger.

"He shared mine. At *my* request." Alina watches every single little tell on Aleksander's face. He hasn't blinked even once, dangerously focused on her every word. "To his credit, he did put up a *very* good fight. You should be *proud*."

The very air in the room feels like an explosive fume, waiting to combust. Alina sips her *kvas*, waiting, because it's out and now it's the Darkling's turn to play his hand. It's been months and they haven't had it out yet; they might as well go with a bang.

They've been playing nice together, but the time for playing nice *is over*.

"Once again," he says with all the calm of the eye of a storm. "You've betrayed me. You're still a treacherous woman. Even after all these years."

*Ha!* Betrayed him? They are *so* beyond such things. Are they really keeping count?

Alina points her finger accusingly at his study, just beyond the other set of doors, where all her maps reside like sick trophies. "No more treacherous than you, Aleksander. What do you call that disgusting display? It's like a museum of *every horror and atrocity you've ever forced me to commit*." Her voice rises precariously. "*Every blemish* you've ever put on my soul."

The shadows grow darker in the room and a handful of candles gut out, dying a sudden death. Smoke curls in the darkness.

"So," the Darkling's eyes reflect shadow, smoke, and candle flame. "Is he your new favorite for the decade? At least he's a Grisha."

Oh, Alina could just throw her head back and laugh, or cry. It must drive him to madness. Aleksander could easily hate Mal, a lowly *otkazat'sya,* but it's likely much harder for him to hate his most glorified heartrender.

It's harder to cast aside his right hand. And, unfortunately for him, *she knows it*.

"You say this as if I have a new man in my bed every decade that passes and you above all know that's *simply not true*."

"Is? Is it not true?" He scoffs, eyes flashing. "First, it was your tracker. Then, Fedyor, now-"

Alina picks up the nearest figurine and throws it at him. "*I never slept with Fedyor!* How many times do I have to tell you people this?"

Now, the Darkling's mouth curls into a thin smile. He looks away from her briefly, scoffing. "Obviously, it must have been a concern to someone *other than myself*." He pauses, his eyes drifting around the room, thinking. Calculating, even through his anger. "What is a fitting punishment, do you think? I'll let you choose. He's going to have to keep his hands, naturally, but-"

How dare he bring up something so medieval, so damn barbaric. To cut off the hand that steals. Alina won't listen to this. She points at him as she yells, "You gave me my freedom. I *used* it. That time was *mine* to use as I saw fit and you sent him with me!"

Anger, dark and cruel, passes over his striking features. "I don't recall allowing you your freedom so that you could spread your legs for my most trusted Grisha."

Saints, she doesn't know if she wants to just scream or cry. Maybe both at once. Even if Ivan has hurt her heart where it matters the most, she won't allow anything to happen to him. Her voice drips with threat, low like a hidden undertow in the ocean. "I won't allow you to punish him. Punish me, but you won't touch him."

His eyebrows rise coolly, coming to stand closer to her. "You won't allow it? Oh, *I see*. Do you fancy yourself in love? He's certainly not as heroic as your tracker was, and he's just as ruthless and cruel as I am, so this surprises me. Do you honestly think he loves you?"

Something coils painfully inside of Alina; perhaps she's revealed too much to him, too much for him to use against her. Worse is the doubt that he's so effortlessly placed inside of her, growing it into weeds. Love isn't something she and Ivan ever talked about, but she would have liked to imagine that he felt *something* strong for her. She would have loved to imagine that he cared, even…even after what he did.

But doubt…doubt is a powerful emotion, destructive.

"I think you should stop talking about things that *don't matter*," Alina snaps, hating herself and all her fraught emotions, the ones that have been thrown out of whack for the past four months. "I'm here, aren't I? Ivan still serves you, *without question*. All of the *Corporalki* respect him. You couldn't *ask* for a better soldier."

Aleksander's eyes go speculative and his hands settle at her waist, like iron shackles. "Do you truly believe I've been oblivious, these past few months? I knew something was *off*, the moment you returned. I just didn't know what it was. I thought it strange, when he wanted to distance himself from you. Now, I see why." His hands tighten, a subtle display of the rage beneath his calm demeanor.

Alina's heart is racing, unsure of where he's going with the conversation. "He's still your right hand-"

"It's a funny thing. I think Ivan is a little bit more *yours* than he is mine, now." The Darkling utters softly, tendrils of his darkness crawling over her possessively. His mouth hovers just above her lips as he whispers, "*What do you think of that*?"

She stiffens in his arms, hearing the danger, as loud as any warning bell.

“Do you intend to take him from me as well?” *The way you did with Mal?*

Aleksander’s eyes glitter like hellfire, amused at her jadedness. “Why would I do that? After all, Ivan didn’t *take* you from me, quite the contrary; he *kept* you for me. If he’s kept you sane enough to perform as you should, who am I to complain? You are still *mine*.” His hand settles on her amplifier cruelly, sending a spark of awareness through her. “You always will be. And now I know what you fear to lose once again.”

Alina recoils from him, feeling suddenly quite ill.

“You’re a snake,” she utters lowly.

His mouth slowly brushes over hers, their gazes locked together in an eternal war. “I am whatever I must be, my love.”

Snapping her face away from him, Alina hisses, “You are *loathsome*.”

“What you have with him; it’s to end now.”

"That's not your choice!" Striding away from him, needing to put space between them, Alina pauses on the other side of the war table. Her heart is in her throat and she feels tension growing tight in her neck. “Do you intend to have this conversation with him or am I the sole bearer of your displeasure? *As always*.”

“I’m having it with you, because I don’t think you want me to be having this discussion with him, Alina.” He looks like a portrait of sin and elegance, lordly and beautiful even in his shadow. “I don’t think you want that at all.”

The threat is so loud, it simply can’t be missed.

Something monstrous coils inside of Alina. “So that’s what it’s come to. You’ll tell me I can no longer have what *you admit belongs to me*? You’ll *threaten* me? With him?”

“What do you think? Must I?”

“I think,” Alina snarls, “You’d best tread carefully on roads where you do not belong.”

The wind howls outside, the windows creaking. A storm is brewing.

“I can forgive him easier than I can forgive you. He’s been at my side for *longer* than you. I’ve known him since he was a *boy,*” he whispers cruelly. “He’ll fall back into line easily enough. But he must fall in line and come to heel.”

“He’s not a dog,” Alina snarls, red flashing across her vision. She’s called Ivan a dog herself, but she won’t listen to anyone else call him that, bluntly or otherwise.

“And you’re not his bitch!” Aleksander yells in reply.

Had he physically slapped her, she couldn’t have been more shocked. Livid, she picks up his lovely crystal decanter and launches it at the double doors leading into the suite, listening to

it smash loudly on impact.

Aleksander gapes at her, his mask of control completely collapsing in a heap. “That was aged seventy years!”

“A shame,” Alina replies hatefully. “You can age another one. You have *time*.”

“You go *too far*. I indulge you and you take more than you deserve. If you’re insinuating that I must outlast yet another man in your life, you presume much, Alina.”

“You cannot force me to forget him.”

“I can make you do anything I want. If I need to make him your whipping boy-”

The feeling that rises up inside of her is full of murder and it nearly surprises even her. Her Cut smashes through the windows, glass bursting outward in a loud crash. Aleksander stands there, staring at her with eyes like death. For a moment, silence passes between them as he appraises her.

A small, little huff of a disbelieving, bitter laugh spills from his lips. “Impressive. You taught yourself the Cut. Did he know you were capable of this?”

Alina barely hides her own surprise that she was able to do it in his presence. There was no restraint; she simply acted. “I never told him,” She utters in a hushed tone, deathly serious. “Because I knew he would tell *you*.”

The smirk that shapes his lips is ugly.

The doors slam open and two of the Darkling’s personal *Oprichniki* run in, saying, “Sir, are you-”

The Darkling rounds on them like a midnight storm, his voice like thunder, “*Get out* and do not enter, no matter what else you hear.”

The double doors slam shut with a final bang, leaving Alina and the Darkling alone once more, encased in their verbal battle. They remain silent, for a very long pause, each considering their next move.

“It’s refreshing to know that you lie even to him,” Aleksander says finally. “You improved your craft. I’m impressed. Do you think to kill me with your power? It won’t work; it still belongs to me. You will always be mine and nothing -*not even another man*- will ever change that.”

“I might belong to you, but he belongs to me now. You said so yourself, didn’t you? Moments ago?” Alina says through gritted teeth, her power still glittering around her, unrestrained. “And I will see you dead, one way or another, if you harm him. He didn’t choose me; *I chose him*.”

With the windows broken, wind begins to drift inside, carrying the scent of rain on it.

The Darkling stares her down, unblinking. “He could have said no.”

“He did say no! Repeatedly!”

Aleksander pulls one of his chairs out from the table and sits in it proudly, eyes spitting all sorts of foul things. “He gave in…and that’s all that matters.” Darkness and shadow crawls over the walls, cutting out more of the candles, casting them in terrible obsidian. Alina’s small light persists, only a small glow inside of his midnight miasma. “I ought to have him whipped bloody. I ought to have you *watch*. I want you to look into his eyes with every. single. stroke.”

His words are like open wounds.

Alina draws her fingernails across the map on the table, ripping and tearing long slashes through it, her mouth in a snarl. "I will destroy everything in the damn palace. *Everything*. Look me in the eye and tell me I won't. And then when I'm done, I'll dedicate my life to ruining yours. Piece by piece. Tell me I'm lying."

"I have no doubt you have the heart for it," Aleksander says carefully. "But, I'm also not lying when I tell you *he will suffer first*."

Her heart seizes and she goes to threaten him again with her power, but as she tries to summon it to herself, she feels herself hit a block; Aleksander. He smiles coldly; his grip solidly in place around her small science and now that he knows what she can do, he’s not letting go. “I don’t think so, love. The same trick won’t work twice,” he whispers mockingly.

So, they are at a dangerous impasse. His threat hangs in the air like a plague.

Alina must change her tone; it’s what he wants. She must *bend*. Even if it makes her sick to her stomach. *You’ll do it for Ivan, because of what you had with him. It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t his fault that you chased after him the way you did.*

Alina swallows her pride with great effort. Hides her claws and her fangs very carefully. Locks them away for later use.

She waltzes very slowly around the table, placing herself in his lap. His body goes tense, his face tight. Alina says with false gentleness, “Let’s be friendly, Aleks. There’s no need for this ugliness. I’m home again. What do you care of what is in the past?” Her lips travel across his ear and the familiar scent of rich sandalwood fills her senses. Alina pushes down her urge to claw his face open. “Tonight, you’ll feel *much* better.”

His pulse picks up slightly, visible at his jugular. “Are you actually attempting to appease me for once in your life?” Aleksander’s voice is dark and guarded.

She brushes her nose along his jawline. Her skin crawls with a dreaded mix of lust and revulsion. The push and pull of light and dark, something she can never seem to escape. She desires him, even as she loathes him with every fiber of her being.

Even as she wants to dig her hands into his ribcage and rip out the rotted organ he claims is his heart.

The Darkling's large, fine-boned hand finds its way into her hair. He forces her to look at him and stares down into her eyes. "If you are, I know your reasoning. This is *not* quid pro quo, *my love*. You will conduct yourself in a manner befitting your station, under my roof."

Jerking her head out of his grasp, Alina looks down at him from the line of her nose. "You will treat me with the respect I deserve. I'm not an impressionable young girl anymore. I'm home. I'm yours, *but he is mine*. Take it or leave it, Aleks. *Leave him be*. He's far too loyal to you for it to matter- I was a distraction to him, nothing more." The words taste poisonous on her tongue.

Aleksander's smile is a cold thing, like winter at dawn. "You've always been a poor judge when it comes to men."

Isn't that the story of her life?

"Tell me," She asks, no- *she demands*. "Tell me you won't harm him."

His gaze consumes her. Aleksander pronounces his next words carefully, with painful precision. "He'll live. I have need of him still. I need him to keep you in line when we head to Fjerda."

The memory of the map, the final one that she drew, burns in her mind. His horrible plan, brought to life. "I won't do it. You cannot-"

"I can. I will. You will. And he will." The Darkling utters softly, eyebrows raised pleasantly, as if speaking of the weather instead of dominating an entire nation. "We all win, in some small little way, Alina."

He must see the unhappy expression on her face, because he huffs out a short laugh. "Don't look so distraught, love. I'm *allowing* you to keep *my heartrender*. Aren't you pleased?"

No, she's not. Because Aleksander does everything for a reason.

"But know *this*; I don't want to hear of it," he purrs dangerously in her ear, sending shivers down her spine. "I don't want to hear a *single* whisper. I don't want to see him exit your room, smelling of you. I don't want to see proof of him written on your skin. And if he so much as gives me an insubordinate look *ever again*, there will be repercussions."

Alina almost cannot believe him, and yet she does. He wants her to continue strengthening his leverage over her. If he allows her to keep Ivan, he will always have her head poised over the guillotine, so to speak.

"I thought you claimed it must end?" She whispers. "Are you redacting that statement?"

"Perhaps. However." Aleksander's voice dips in threat. "If, for *one moment*, I don't believe you are mine-"

He still wants to be appeased. *Fine*. Alina can sell herself. She's good enough to turn his emotions right around. She shifts in his lap, preparing herself. "I promise you nothing," Alina whispers in his ear, twisting her fingers in his lovely, thick hair. She drags her lips teasingly across his jaw, eyes on his face. "But I promise that I *can* make you *forget*."

He looks down at her from under lowered lashes. Those dark lashes, devastatingly beautiful, eyes like midnight gems, filled with cold darkness. "Is that an invitation?" He chuckles; it isn't a friendly sound. "I thought you were mad at me?"

Alina runs her hands down his chest, shifting her hips on his lap, pressing against him hard enough to see his eyelids flutter subtly. She whispers, "You'd be surprised with what I can do when I'm angry. Don't you remember *how good* I am at hate?"

Aleksander's cock grows firm beneath her. He knows. He remembers.

His breathing shifts slightly, even as he tries to hide it from her. "…and what if I don't want it this way? After such an unpleasant fight?"

Alina will not be stopped, not when she's mentally dedicated herself to this act; *to paying her due to her master*. "I thought you missed me?" Her voice slithers mockingly through the midnight air. She presses against him tighter. "I *thought* you didn't want to be alone? Or were those lies, too?"

His eyes caress her body, taking in every inch of her. "You are a poison in my veins," he utters.

"As you are in mine," Alina whispers into his ear, roughly ripping open his trousers. "But, you already knew that."

His reaction is swift, lying her back onto his war table, standing between her thighs. She can feel the whisper of his power, the anger in it, the desire beneath even that. As always, he loathes how he wants her, despises his moments of weakness for her, is furious at how even when she harms him, he always wants *more*.

Her dress-like *kefta* spreads open easily enough and her vicious fingers make quick work of his trousers. She gasps when he presses against her folds, fights her own warring feelings of desire, guilt, and revulsion.

She closes her eyes and reminds herself that Ivan already assumed she'd been doing this, since the first night they returned. It makes her heart hurt, it makes her want to cry, but *she can't*, because right now, she's ensuring Aleksander's ego remains in place, because if it slips, Ivan is the one who will suffer.

The slow slide of his familiar flesh against hers builds a slow heat within her, tingling with awareness and power. He won't harm her, even if he's angry. He's always been a careful lover, attentive, ever aware of her.

Alina wraps her legs around his trim waist, arching against him slightly, desire growing hotter, alongside everything else.

When his length slides into her, slowly, inch by inch, Alina bites back a weak gasp, her hair a halo around her head, spread across his maps. Aleksander leans down, panting, eyes black with hunger.

“Make me believe it,” he rasps in her ear.

*Make me believe you love me.*

Eyes lidded, Alina rolls her hips fluidly, dedicating herself to the role that she must play. She drags his mouth to hers with a growl, saying, “Be careful what you wish for, *love*.” She bites his lip hard enough that she knows he’ll need to find a healer to fix it later, digs her nails into his clothed shoulders, tastes his blood on her tongue.

As he moves within her, a perfect steady rhythm, he makes no argument against how rough she is, and he doesn’t comment on how she tries to make him *become* more aggressive with her. The steady press of his cock, the way he feels inside of her, making his slow, steady love- It’s not enough, *it’s not enough*, she wants her spine to *ache,* she doesn’t want to remember her own name…

~*~

Afterwards, while his fingers trace invisible symbols on her bare flesh, he tells her:

“I’m rarely merciful. You are fortunate that he’s too valuable for me to cast aside. You are lucky that I want you pleased, and that I will do things *I hate* to make you happy,” Aleksander utters quietly into her hair, his form pressing her down onto the large table. Sweat cooling on their bodies. “If he were any other man, *this would not stand*.”

Alina stares upwards at nothing. She’s trying to keep her emotions inside her body, locked away. Doesn’t want them to spill out like rotted intestines.

Because that’s how she feels about herself right now. Vile.

~*~

He doesn’t let her return to her room that night.

Or the next.

The Darkling relearns her body, making note of her new preferences, recognizing them as things she’s gained from her most recent lover.

As such, he refuses to take her *harder, faster*, no matter how she begs for it, because she can’t…she can’t easily find her release without it anymore and it’s distressing for her that she’s changed so much. He teases her, drags her to the edge until she feels like she’s going to break and she wishes she could just fall apart.

Sometimes, she gets her own revenge. Clawing her marks into his flesh. Sucking him down to the root, just to watch him come undone like an untried boy, the way his thighs quiver and his head tips back, lovely lips parted with need.

“Maybe I should thank him,” he tells her, one night, mockingly. “He clearly dedicated a lot of time and effort into making you exactly as he desired.”

“Maybe you should,” she replies with a cruel curl to her lips, even though she knows Ivan would be livid.

Aleksander chuckles darkly, the shadows around them growing.

---

---

Regardless of the guilt and the sick feeling inside of her, Alina feels at least proud that *she got her way*.

She sees the two of them, often from a distance. Aleksander *and* Ivan. They meet with dignitaries, hold war meetings with higher level Grisha, and they haven’t murdered each other yet.

Outwardly, both of them seem fine.

In fact, it pisses her off when she sees the two of them chuckling together over something and she wants to cast them both into the sea.

*Men.*

---

---

Eventually, *eventually*, the Darkling does not protest when Alina tells him she’s returning to her own suites for the week. It seems, he’s been appeased by her, *well and truly*.

She’s sleeping alone again, trying not to hate herself for what she did, mentally stewing over how she’s going to thwart Aleksander’s dark plans for her. There are moments that she spends time berating herself for not realizing who was commissioning those very odd maps. Especially the final one.

Clearly, it had not only been his way of keeping tabs on her, but also his way of staying close to her, filling his walls with her work, being able to examine every stroke of her pencil and pen, to run his fingers where hers had been.

*There’s only one person here that can help…and she won’t be happy to see me*, Alina thinks morosely. The very idea of what she’s considering makes her want to curl up in a ball and go into hibernation.

She won't allow Aleksander to destroy Fjerda. Her heart twists painfully and her mouth feels dry with horror and anxiety, thinking of all the screams of innocent people as darkness falls over them. *No*. Not when she can stop it.

If she can use the Cut now, who is to say she cannot destroy the Fold-

Out of the blue, her door opens and Alina almost sits up in shock and outrage -*because who dares to interrupt her not-sleeping self*- but a sensation of calm instantly falls over her, like a warm, fuzzy blanket. The desire to sit up in bed and make snappy demands slips away, like a pebble sinking to the bottom of a pond.

There and gone in a blink.

Ivan's checking her room, quietly stepping up to her windows, making a sound of irritation when he finds them all unlocked. Alina distantly hears the latches snap into place with authority. He's doublechecking the work of her guards and he's clearly finding them lacking.

It seems the horse incident has left him feeling the urge to take a tighter grip on guarding her once more. Seeing how the whole *Oprichniki* thing didn't exactly pan out how he would have liked.

Alina keeps her eyes closed, tells herself not to look at him, shouldn't want to look at him, but she can almost smell the scent of his cologne as he slips past her bed, going to the bathroom, checking the final windows and corners. She can hear the familiar stomp of his boots and it makes her heart ache.

There's another hiss of displeasure and the telltale snap of more locks.

He's mad, because assassins *have* snuck through her windows before. Years ago, anyway. What an ugly business that had been.

When Ivan returns to the main area of her room, he starts blowing out the few candles she left burning, throwing the room into shadow. With nothing left for him to examine, Ivan goes still. Alina can feel him pause, can practically sense his eyes running over her body, the way she's tangled in her sheets.

Feeling wicked, even through the half-assed calm he's pushed on her, Alina slyly rolls from her side onto her back, knowing he can see her in the moonlight. She's playing with fire and she *doesn't care*. Stretching languidly, artfully drawing up one knee, her loose nightgown rides up just a little too far.

In a low tone, she utters, "Are you thinking of joining me or do you need to check under the bed too?"

Oh, she can just visualize the flash in his eyes!

When Alina slowly opens her eyes to look at him, she sees that he's frozen in place, like some sort of snake waiting to strike, his eyes at the apex of her thighs, making her ache. She can practically taste his desire to kick off his boots and crawl into bed with her.

Then, annoyingly, he growls under his breath and spins on his heel, retreating back out her double doors, shutting them behind him. When he starts lighting into Alina's guards, he's loud enough that Alina can hear him verbally eviscerating them for being sloppy in their care of her.

*Sigh*, Alina finds herself thinking, *did he come in here to torment me or torment himself?*

She wants him to come back in.

It takes all her willpower to not get out of the bed, throw open her double doors and yank him back inside by his collar.

Aleksander said he didn't want to *see or hear* of Alina taking Ivan to her bed.

He never actually said she couldn't *have* him…well, he said he wanted their relationship to end, but then he sort of walked that statement away, so…

Perhaps she should have clarified that. Perhaps she should have asked.

Then again, how would it have gone? *Love, you don't mind if I have my sidepiece, right? Just so long as I'm discreet about the fact that I'm having him?*

Alina snorts, imagining Aleksander's face. No, it's better to do and ask forgiveness later, if caught.

She knows what makes Aleksander's knees go weak, after all.

---

---

It's dinner with the rest of the Grisha, in their grand dining hall. Alina sits to Aleksander's left, Ivan still on his right.

It's amazing that all three of them look perfectly normal, sitting next to each other. As if Ivan isn't secretly stewing over his jealousy, as if Alina isn't pining over him, as if Aleksander isn't irritated by Alina's sad glances at Ivan. It's a sick sort of circus.

The food is not 'peasantly' tonight, so Alina digs in like a starving wolf. There's growing chatter as more and more Grisha filter in, starting their conversations.

She's eating and drinking away when Ivan sharply says, "Could you not chew like a common barn animal? I can hear you over here."

"Please, do mind your own business, Ivan," she replies irritably, drinking from her cup.

"He's right," Aleksander piles on. "You should eat like a lady of your station."

Alina's mouth drops open and her eyes flash. This must be a joke. It has to be. Her eyes dart between both of them and she draws herself up with authority, voice dripping with disdain. "Is there anything else the pair of you would like me to do? Do I need sit here like an innocent princess, Aleksander? Is my neckline too low, Ivan? You keep looking at it- and *I've noticed*."

He flushes and Aleksander's eyes cut over to him *briefly*.

"There's no need for the attitude," Aleks states calmly, eyes returning to Alina. "*Behave* yourself."

Ivan chokes on his drink.

"I can behave however I want," Alina replies. "The two of you irritate me." When Ivan rolls his eyes, Alina continues, staring at him pointedly. "Is there something funny that you want to share?"

He meets her gaze and his eyes are saying that he thinks she needs to be pounded through a headboard to make her behave. The way he pushes her bloodflow downward hard enough to make her thighs clench tells her that he wants to be the one to do it.

Effectively, that shuts her right up and she delicately looks away from him, because *oh, Ivan, don't be a tease...*

Aleksander likely didn't catch all of that unspoken exchange, but he probably caught enough.

Making sure that Ivan can hear him, Aleksander says to Alina, "I want you to come to my room tonight."

Ivan goes still, his throat subtly working. Alina sees it, feels her heart flutter sadly. She wants to reach out to him, wants to say no, to say that she wants to be with him instead, but she's well aware that it cannot happen.

*Discreet. Discreet. You can find another way. Kings and Queens do this shit all the time...*

"As you wish," Alina tells Aleks coolly.

When dinner is over, she catches Ivan's gaze in the dark hallway and she wills him to look inside of her and see how she feels. His eyes are dark and full of an unhappy emotion and Alina softens her eyes and when she walks past him, she brushes the back of her hand against his.

She leans a little closer and barely utters, "I'll be thinking of you."

His breath catches in his lungs and Alina quickly walks away, her *kefta* whispering across the stone floors.

~*~

The Darkling has always been a grand, considerate lover. Every touch of his hand, the caress of his lips, everything is production and elegance, perfection in the form of skin on skin. Alina enjoys him, even if her mind wants to dance on his grave.

It's glaring proof that sex and love do not always mean the same thing.

Tonight, he's decided to spread her out in his sheets, his mouth playing across her body, slow and steady, until she's panting, hair strewn across his pillows. When his mouth travels between her legs, normally Alina would allow him to simply taste her, but tonight-

Instead of sweetly tangling her fingers in his lovely mane of dark hair and letting him go about his business, Alina roughly grabs him, fingernails and all, demanding with a push of her palm and hips simultaneously, one leg hooking up behind his head, pulling him inward hard. She shifts and grinds her clit against his mouth, taking what she wants her way-

Aleksander resists, only long enough to give he an odd look. Alina flushes, realizing how aggressive she'd been, how for a moment, she'd not quite been thinking of him. "Did I scare you?" She relaxes her fierce grip on his head.

Did she scare the Darkling, *hah!*

His mouth opens and closes as he tries to form a coherent sentence. "You surprised me, is all."

Then, his mouth is between her thighs again, warm and hot and eager for her taste.

Alina's eyes drift closed and an image of Ivan between her thighs is the first thing her mind conjures. Her stomach cramps and she feels herself flood with arousal, her offering making Aleksander moan softly, his tongue artfully tracing her folds, teasing.

Even if Ivan shredded her heart, bringing her back here, she still desires him, wants to taste him on her tongue, wants to feel the strength of him pressing her down, his teeth buried in her shoulder. In her mind, she's with him, because she *misses* being with him.

Her gasps and cries of ecstasy are wordless; she's afraid of what she might say otherwise.

When Aleksander's inside of her, it's the way he prefers, soft and sweet, as if they're making love. It's in this that she cannot pretend, because this wasn't Ivan's style whatsoever.

The way Aleksander kisses her, *as if he loves her*, his hips slowly rocking in and out, his lips consuming her gasps. They don't climax together; Alina has to ask for *harder, please, faster* and she wants it differently, but he won't give it to her.

She's ashamed of what her body wants. She's ashamed of how terribly she wants Ivan to fuck her into oblivion, whispering awful, humiliating things in her ear.

Regardless, Aleksander coaxes her to climax, a slow, tortuous one that leaves her gasping.

Afterwards, when his breathing slows and Alina is left with her thoughts, a wave of emotion starts pushing its way up her esophagus. She feels like a glass, full to the brim. She can't hold

everything in. Sadness and dismay -*close cousins*- battle inside of her.

She feels…like a bird ready to escape a cage. How dare Aleksander continually dangle Ivan in front of her, all while keeping her away from him? How dare they both continue their chummy comradery with each other, all while treating her like a naughty girl-

Suddenly unable to breathe, Alina gets out of the decadent bed and slings on her silken robe, not even bothering to tie it as she heads out to return to her room. No one should be up this late, no one but her guards.

Edik and Illya are off duty, so the night guard avert their faces when she stomps by them in a whirl of silk and despair. "*Sankta* Alina, your clothes-"

She pays them no heed, simply striding back towards her suite, robe whipping about her haphazardly. Anyone who wants a free show is going to get one, because she feels cold and empty and used right about now.

*Look all you want*, she thinks caustically. *Take your fill.*

She doesn't come across many more Grisha in the hallways, but the ones that do see her gaze at her with shocked, wide eyes.

What, haven't they seen a madwoman before?

When Alina finally reaches her suite, vaguely hearing her guard following behind to take up their posts at her new location, she stomps inside her doors and shuts them behind her with a vicious bang. Red hot fury burns in her, like the thorns of a red rose, and she screams into one of the stupid throw pillows on the nearest chair.

After finishing with a few good, tormented screams, Alina throws the pillow across the darkened room with a snarl, feeling like a she-wolf with her leg trapped in a brutal bear trap.

She watches the pillow sail across the room, but the air in her lungs goes still when she realizes she's not alone; there's a figure on her bed.

Ivan's sitting at the edge in his deep scarlet *kefta*, arms crossed over his chest, the dark curling around him. Simply watching her come undone. As always, he's not afraid of her violent displays of ugly emotion.

Alina doesn't bother with decency, doesn't even clutch her robe closed, too angry to feel ashamed. She still remembers what he said to her, that night Aleksander found out. "What are you doing in my room? *Get out*."

"Come here," he demands, his voice darker than the shadows.

Jealousy is thick in the air and she can almost taste it; and worse, she can't blame him. "Why should I?" She says, just to be difficult, just to irritate him further.

"Because I told you to," he snaps. "And because *you want to*."

Well, he's right about that. He's able to feel the excited flutter inside of her body, the way she still, and always will, respond to him.

Slowly, looking down her nose at him, Alina saunters to the foot of her bed, naked hips swaying enticingly in her untied robe, coming to stand just a few feet away. "Well?"

"Closer," Ivan says without amusement.

She takes one step forward.

"Close enough so I can smell your cunt," he drawls venomously.

Alina inhales sharply, heart slamming against her ribcage. Without another word, she steps up between his spread legs, trembling, hating that she's already filled with need for him.

Without warning, Ivan presses two fingers up into her, crooking them hard enough that Alina gasps and has to go up on her tiptoes, one of her hands going to his shoulder for balance. He feels the slick inside of her, her own arousal and the leavings of another man.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Ivan's voice is unpleasant, tight, even as he strokes the pads of his fingers against the spongy, sensitive place inside of her.

*Oh, Saints*. Her head tips back slightly and she fights to keep her control.

"Yes," She lifts her chin and flexes around his fingers lightly, giving him a taste of how well she can grip his cock. She's burning for him, nipples peaked with excitement. "Are you here to take your slice of the cake?"

His sneer is visible, even in the dark. "Would you let me? You want me to take you, after he's already had you?"

She drips down her thigh and down his hand. She flushes in shame and need. "It's you that I want."

He pumps his fingers slowly, watching her face as her lips part. "Do you truly think of me? When he's inside you?"

"Sometimes," she replies, her voice weak, her insides feeling like molten liquid.

Ivan's face is hard, unkind. Vicious. "Even though I brought you back to your cage? You still want my cock, even though I took you away from your freedom?"

"You were my freedom." Her tone of voice is a little broken, strangely forlorn.

Because it's true.

He groans then, at those words. His arm snakes around her bare waist and he turns with her, pinning her down on her back, flat on the bed. Alina's legs spread for him on reflex, wanting him, all of him, the scent of him filling her nose, the feel of his body-

Those thick fingers are filling her up again, and Ivan hovers over her, balancing on one forearm, looking down at her while the fingers of his other hand pump in and out of her. Alina spasms with need, back arching, her hands trying to find purchase on his biceps.

When she feels the familiar sensation of his power dipping into her, syncing their hearts, she nearly sobs in relief, moaning at the feeling of him. "*Ivan*-" she says, weakly, out of breath.

She's missed feeling their hearts beat together. She never thought she'd feel that way, and yet she does. Alina can practically feel his desire for her, his arousal, his yearning, tailing along his small science as it glides through her.

Fedyor often let her feel his feelings, when he heartrended her…but Ivan…Ivan didn't. And now-

"Be good for me," he grits out, drilling his fingers into her harder, his thumb pressing down on her swollen clit. "Be a good girl."

"Yes, *oh*, Ivan please, *ah*-"

His power is completely in her veins, he's riding their shared need, sharing in her tortured euphoria. Her core squelches wetly around his fingers, and she covers her eyes with one hand, embarrassed.

"Bear down on my fingers," he says, sounding hoarse.

"I-" She tries, but she feels so full, he's got four fingers in her, stretching her, fucking into her.

"Harder."

Alina flexes her inner muscles hard, trying to show him how she'd squeeze his cock if it were inside of her, and he rewards her with the next press of his fingers against the spot that makes white flash behind her eyelids. A violent release crashes through her and she soaks his hand as she lets out a short, sharp cry.

Ivan groans, low and agonized, grinding his hips into her mattress. When he goes still, panting, she realizes he'd orgasmed too, in his trousers.

She feels exhausted, bones tired and weary, body ready to sink into the earth. All the dark feelings from earlier crash back into her, fighting away her euphoria. What sort of monster has she become, that she can go from one man to the next? How can she go from one villain to the other villain who brought her back to her cage, holding the lock and key?

Sprawled in her sheets, Alina covers her face with her hands and her mouth twists with a sob. She barely strangles the broken noise in her throat. Saints, she's gotten herself messed up these past few decades.

"What's wrong?" He's frowning, caressing her thighs.

“You hurt me,” she whimpers sadly. She wants to reach into her own chest and dig her nails into her traitorous heart until she feels nothing.

“Just now?” Why does he sound concerned? Why does he sound like he cares? As if he wants more from her than just her body? His wet hand travels over her stomach soothingly and it makes her want to scream.

“Now. Then. What does it matter?” she says bitterly.

He’s quiet, cupping her between her legs to where she’s sore. Soothing her with his small science, even if he realizes it isn't a physical pain that she’s talking about. “I did what I had to do. Don’t you understand that by now?”

Alina doesn’t want to hear it, even though she knows it to be the truth. Alina digs her fingers into her eyes and sinuses, as if it will detract from the way her heart is wailing. “You shouldn’t be in here.”

“I still want you,” he rasps, sounding oddly torn.

“He knows,” she whispers harshly. “He knows we were together.”

Ivan stiffens. Then he sighs, pressing his face into the sheets. “I’d wondered. He’d started looking at me differently.”

“Probably the same way you’ve been looking at him,” Alina mutters, very familiar with the possessive, jealous glancing both men occasionally passed over the other. Even despite Aleks and Ivan’s close relationship, even when both of them were sharing a malicious smirk together, there was still something jealous that creeped into their gazes, as if wondering who she preferred.

Ivan snorts in dark amusement. Then, “Why am I still alive? Is that your doing?”

She doesn’t want to tell him. It would only make it more awkward between he and Aleks if he knew his General had considered some awful punishments for him. He’d feel worse if he knew that Aleksander was fully intending to use Ivan’s well-being against her, if she refused to do his bidding.

So, she changes the subject.

“He never…he never said we couldn’t…continue being together.” Alina says it carefully, watching his face. A slight lie. Aleksander had said it, but his stance on it didn’t seem to hold.

Ivan stares. “What?”

“He good as told me that as long as he never heard talk about us, he…would look the other way.”

Ivan groans, rubbing his face in disbelief. “You want to play with our lives like that?” He sounds tired. But he also sounds intrigued. “It’s too easy to slip up…”

The moment fades as Alina finds exhaustion creeping over her. It's hard work, pleasing two men…

~*~

She's dreaming something lovely, dreaming of freedom.

They're in their old apartment, in their shared bed. She knows, even with her eyes closed, because it smells like *them* again, and she's warm and safe, it's dawn, and she hears the birds outside. She can almost believe the dream is real.

He's next to her, in their old bed, kissing her neck, lazy and aroused with his morning wood pressed against her. Alina sighs, delighted, cupping his head against her neck, scratching her nails against his scalp.

Oh, she misses the apartment so much. The dream is cozy, and her core is already aching, knowing he's hard and ready next to her, wanting her.

"Ivan," she says sleepily.

"Yes?" His voice is still thick with sleep.

She wiggles her hips a bit, trying to press against him. "Can you- please…?" She's halfway between whining and begging.

He smirks against her throat, all teeth and arrogance. His hand delves between her legs, working her towards a first orgasm, seeking to make her wet enough for him to slide his cock into hard-

There's the sound of a door opening. Alina's brow furrows, even with her eyes shut. Why is a door opening?

The sound of Ivan's husky morning voice growling "***get out***" makes her eyes snap open and realize that…oh. Oh, this is not a dream.

"Oh, *oh*. Sir, I didn't realize you were-" Karyna.

"You're not deaf," Ivan says unpleasantly.

The door slams shut.

Alina feels her face heat in mortification. She's completely naked and he must have taken his pants off before sleeping. Karyna got an *eyeful.* Oh, Saints. "Why are you still in here?"

"I fell asleep."

Panic hits Alina almost immediately. "You have to go. What if she tells someone?"

"Are you throwing me out?" Somehow, it sounds like a dare, coming from him. "She won't. My soldiers know better."

This doesn't explain the threat of the Darkling away whatsoever.

"This happens every time you're about to get your dick wet. You forget common sense." She hisses, pushing at him. "*Out*. Out the bloody window if you have to."

Ivan scoffs at her worried attempts. "Does he come to you in the morning? Personally?"

"Well, no, but- *wait! Oh. Oh, mhm*-"

He flips her onto her belly and after a bare second, he's inside of her, groaning loudly as her body stretches to accommodate him. They both go still, enjoying the feel of being connected to each other again. He feels so-

"Saints, you feel so good," he grunts, slowly beginning to swing his hips with hers. "I've been thinking about this every fucking night, wanting you on my cock-"

Alina is still trying to come to terms with the fact that they are indeed fucking again. In her bedroom. In the Little Palace. Her guards, just outside the doors. Irrespective of this, her hips angle up of their own accord, seeking to take Ivan deeper.

Nothing comes out of her mouth but a soft keen, which is stupidly embarrassing.

Until, she utters, "I miss you."

He must like something about her words, because there's a soft, almost sweet rumble in his chest. He presses them both flat to the bed, pumping his hips into hers with a quick, short rhythm that has them both filling the room with the sounds of their passion. His small science is in her, along with his cock, and he's greedily flooding her body with endorphins and pushing her arousal higher.

Without warning, Alina spills over the edge, crying out in a hoarse voice, clenching down on him hard. Ivan feels it, groaning deliriously, pumping into her three more times before going still, spilling wetly inside of her.

When his orgasm fades away, she feels the way his body tenses, hears him curse under his breath. He pulls out of her and rolls onto his back, staring upwards.

Alina sighs and asks, "Is the horny finally drifting out of your skull, leaving room for your brain?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to leave now?"

He sits up with angry, jerky motions, pulling on his clothes, face tight. "Yes."

"Are you already regretting this?"

Ivan simply looks at her and kisses her mouth just as he stands to leave, giving her no verbal answer.

Alina assumes the answer must be yes.

---

---

It's later that day when Karyna comes to check in on her, looking a little shamefaced. "May I come in?"

Alina looks up from where she's drawing at her desk, Plant Fedyor sitting beside her. "Sure."

The young healer comes further into the room, wringing her hands nervously. It seems like there's something she wants to say, but Alina is going to wait for her to spit it out. Instead, the young woman focuses on what Alina's doing.

Karyna tilts her head, looking curiously at Alina's drawing. "Who is that?"

Alina looks down at her sketchpad wistfully. "Fedyor Kaminsky. Probably before your time in the *Corporalki*."

The young woman nods. "I would remember seeing him. He's lovely."

Beaming, Alina replies, "He was."

"He's…dead?"

Her lashes flutter and a flash of pain touches her heart. "Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? It's not your fault," Alina drawls, recovering herself.

An awkward silence passes over them and Alina can hear Karyna swallowing nervously.

"I assume you came here with something to say?"

Karyna nods, going red as her *kefta*. "I wanted to apologize for walking in unannounced earlier. I didn't realize you would have…I didn't realize…I didn't realize *he* would be in here…"

"Yes, well. Do me a favor and say nothing, got it?"

The girl nods earnestly. "Of course. Say no more." She shifts from foot to foot. "I'm also sorry about the times I told you I thought he was an ass. Or a jerk. Or harsh-"

Alina bursts out laughing. "Why are you sorry? I'm acutely aware that he is *all of those things*."

“You won’t tell him I said that about him, will you? He’s the head of our order,” Karyna says with an anxious look. “I don’t want to get in trouble.”

This poor girl. Alina actually feels like comforting her; and she rarely feels that way about other Grisha these days. “I won’t say anything. *As long as you say nothing*.”

“Deal.” Karyna sits down beside Alina, without permission, but Alina decides to allow it.

The girl isn’t that bad. Maybe she’s growing on her.

“Can I ask-”

“I might not answer,” Alina replies, adding more detail to Fedyor’s luscious hair.

“I thought you were with the General. But…I mean, they do know about each other, right?”

“Oh, they have an idea,” Alina says dryly. She sighs. “You can bank on that. This is going to sound insane, but I don’t know how to *not be* with either of them. But I do know that I like who I am with Ivan better.”

“Do you have to choose?”

“Yes.” Isn’t that…isn’t that obvious?

“You have both of the most powerful men here wrapped around your fingers. Why do you need to choose? Aren’t you a Saint? Aren’t you entitled to as many lovers as you want or something?”

Alina cannot contain the laugh the bubbles up from deep within. Okay, maybe Karyna is really growing on her. “What an idea. The General would probably have you executed for heresy just for saying that. Ivan would throw a violent fit. Regardless, I like it.”

Karyna pales. “He’s not really going to have me killed-”

“No, sweet child.”

The healer looks offended at being called a child. “I’m like twenty-three!”

“Exactly,” Alina replies airily, stroking one finger across one of Plant Fedyor’s petals.

---

---

She dreams of herself, on a skiff. A memory from a very long time ago.

“*I should just tear this down now,” she says, gazing up at the horror and the darkness surrounding them. Her voice, full of anger and conviction.*

*Aleksander is looking down at her coldly, at her amplifier, no ounce of love left in him. His voice, hard, with a trace of disdain. "And what can you really do on your own?"*

*The Stag's sightless eyes stare at her, its head severed from its body in the cold snow. She wants to bury her face in its fur, against its cold body and scream,* ***you were meant to be mine.***

When Alina wakes, alone in her own bed, she finds herself coming to a very unpleasant conclusion.

She cannot delay what she must do any longer.

She needs to speak to the one person who might understand what can be done with her amplifier.

Even if the idea makes her sick.

---

---

When she finally gains enough courage, she makes her way through the grounds towards the old, decrepit hut that makes her skin crawl with every single step she takes. It's a morbid, macabre sort of place now; a tomb with a corpse that still has a soul in its body.

Outside, *Oprichniki* guard the entrance, as they always have, their eyes warily watching Alina approach. Her own guards are two steps behind her, giving her a respectable space.

She comes to a stop and collects herself, even though Alina already knows there's no reason for her to worry about her appearance. Exhaling hard, she steps inside, down the damp, dirty stairs all by herself. Illya and Edik know they are not to follow her down.

Into the unpleasant space she goes, hating the damp, murky scent that hovers in the air. Underneath the earthy scent, there is incense and pungent herbs, filling her nose and her mind. When Alina finally reaches the bottom, her heart is pounding hard, aching in her skull.

Her hands shake.

On the far end of the darkened 'hut' sits an old figure, hair greyed and unkept, slumped in a chair miserably. Alina's mouth goes terribly dry with anxiety, because something about this woman makes her feel ill and always has.

"There you are. It's been years, hasn't it?" The rusty voice says dryly. "Are you still just as pathetic as the last time we spoke?"

"Baghra." The name falls off Alina's tongue and breaks on its way out. "As pleasant as ever."

Aleksander's mother lifts her grim head, as if to look at Alina, even though she *can't*.

Though she's seen the horror many times before, it still does not prepare Alina. The sight of those vacant sockets, the swirling darkness within, set in a hard, cruel face…it still makes her swallow with unease.

The ancient woman gets up from her chair and shambles over to her, grotesque face sneering as she reaches out a wizened hand to feel Alina's face. "Still soft and lovely, just as I remember you. Unlike your soul, I imagine. Has he twisted you up into ugly knots yet? Has he burned away your morals and conscience? Are you a monster like my son, yet?"

Alina clenches her jaw and tries not to inhale. The stench of Baghra is worse than she remembered.

"Yes. I am." A monster, a whore, what does it matter anymore?

Baghra snorts, disbelieving. "Doubtful. Maybe in another hundred years. Why are you here, wasting my time?"

Saints, does Alina ever hate being near Aleksander's mother. There are no pleasantries, there is no kindness. Just cold hard dislike.

She turns her face away and takes a deep breath. "I need to…I need to understand how to reclaim my amplifier."

The words are whispered, but somehow, they sound loud in the hut, down in the deep and the dark. The words are the epitome of treachery against Aleksander and they both know it.

Baghra goes still. "Why do you ask me this? After all these years? Have you now grown the stones to take control of your life, girl? Enchant me with your logic."

"I still…I dream of the Stag. More than ever. It visits me and I can't…I don't understand what it's trying to show me. There must be meaning-"

Baghra scoffs, her head moving with the disdainful sound. "You silly girl. It's *always* been yours. You've never accepted your power enough, your agency, your independence of *him*. You gave in. You wilted, like a flower in a raging storm. You convinced yourself that you'd *never* be enough, all because *that's what he told you*. You let Aleksander *own* you."

The words are painful because they are true.

"I didn't know how to do anything else. I was young…and naïve. And scared." Old, painful feelings flood Alina. She sees an image of herself, decades ago, thinking people were better than what they are. A naïve stupid girl, a girl who just wanted to escape it all.

"You never stood a chance, girl. Not against him. That's why I tried to save you."

"I know." Alina doesn't need her failings thrown in her face. She already hurts herself enough. "I know I failed you. And those who supported you."

"Do you love him yet?" Baghra asks sarcastically. "I assume that's what he's been banking on, all these years. That you'd eventually get over his…inhumanity." She pauses, waiting for

a response. “Nothing to say? *Hm*. You are undecided. Or torn. I’ve heard whispers-”

Alina’s heart leaps. “You’d best not repeat them.”

Baghra smiles grimly. “They must be true then. *Interesting*. I always thought you liked sensitive; Aleksander was good at playing a wounded boy, in need of care. His heartrender though, that one is like ice.”

“Well, he kept me warm enough,” Alina says through gritted teeth, annoyed at where the conversation has gone. “For a merciless block of ice.”

The other woman chuckles, a sound like a dry, crackling leaf in autumn. “Perhaps you have grown bolder. Maybe you *are ready*.”

“If I’m ready, how do I claim my amplifier-”

The older woman shakes her head in frustration, her voice rough with emotion. “The Stag *is* you, Alina Starkov. You just need to accept it as *you* and *stop believing* you are worthless. You never were. You never will be.” The old woman slaps Alina right across the face, hard enough to make Alina yelp. “Now, get out. Your stupidity gives me a migraine, girl.”

---

---

That night, in Aleksander’s bed, she pours out all her frustration into him, wishing it was as simple as tearing her power away from him for good, with a single thought. What the hell does Baghra even mean, *the Stag is you?* Ugh. Frustrating old scheming hag.

She’d had to go to Karyna, to remove the hand print on her cheek after that lovely encounter.

*{With wide eyes, Karyna says, “Baghra slapped you?”*

*“My face says yes, doesn’t it?”*

*“Did you slap her back?”*

*Alina deeply regrets not doing so, at this point.}*

The Darkling is on his back, sprawled gracefully, hair mussed and head thrown back, even as he bites his lips, trying to keep from moaning.

“I heard you -*mhm*- visited my mother today -*ah*- discuss anything interesting?”

Alina slowly slides her mouth off his manhood, listening to the way he gasps, admiring the way his thighs tense. “Is that what you want to discuss right now?” She bites his hip hard enough to make him curse. “The mother whose eyes you tore out?”

Aleksander sits up and twists them, moving Alina beneath him. “I see your point,” he rasps against her skin.

His mouth slides across the soft skin of her belly, leaving fire in its wake. Alina shivers, her nails digging into his shoulders.

When he slides inside, it’s with a certain slowness, an ease of time. Aleksander likes drawing every single motion out, every single slide felt with painful clarity. It’s too emotional, somehow, and Alina doesn’t like feeling this way.

She tries to force him to move faster, to go *harder*, to be *rougher*. She snaps her hips into his, mouth shifted into a snarl.

“I’d like to invite you to stop trying to make me into that brute you have warm your bed. I am not him,” Aleksander says into her mouth, keeping his motions languid and slow.

It takes her a few moments to realize what he said and it stuns her that perhaps he’s admitted to knowing she’s had Ivan again. If only once.

… and that he didn’t punish Ivan for it. Relief flashes through her. Then, she realizes his other meaning; he has no intention of giving it to her the way she likes, because he knows that’s how Ivan takes her to bed.

*Ugh.*

It drives her mad and he knows it. She’s gotten used to having it a certain way for the past few years and being with Aleksander is like having to learn how to be with someone new all over again, at times.

She can’t hide, she can’t just drift away, because every move he makes it like sin itself. It coils deep in her belly, unfulfilled.

He teases her, making her ache for it.

“I don’t like it this way,” she replies irritably. Embarrassingly, she almost sounds petulant.

The Darkling chuckles, something she can feel in his chest, pressed tight against hers. “You’ll get over that.”

*Says you*, she thinks sourly, bucking her hips up at him again, roughly in open rebellion.

~*~

“We’ll be heading out soon,” he tells her, running his hands softly over her thighs. “To see the new skiff my fabrikators have been making.”

“Your new evil project, I take it?” Alina’s voice is numb.

He huffs out a small laugh. “Indeed. You will see.”

She wishes that she didn't have to.

---

---

It seems that soon means two weeks of time. "I will meet you there," he tells her, kissing her forehead absently as he makes his final preparations. "You'll travel with the *Oprichniki* and heartrenders for a guard. The area is relatively safe…but still. You need to be…watched."

Watched. *Ha*. He means, kept from running away.

Regardless, Alina is pleased that she won't be traveling with Aleksander; she's not sure she would be able to behave herself. She's not sure that she'd be able to keep from stabbing him with the nearest sharp object.

As she steps up to her coach later that day, the one that Aleksander so politely commissioned for her, she notices some young *Corporalnik* holding the door open for her. Alina halts and her eyes flicker up and down the boy. Although they appear to be of the same age, Alina can't help but see a child now.

It's funny how being made more eternal can do that to a person. She wonders how the Darkling has even stomached her for all these years.

Noticing the odd look she's giving him, the young man asks questioningly, "Sun Summoner? Are you ready?"

Her back is up at this and she feels absurdly like being a difficult witch in this very moment. This is who they are sending with her? Some boy? "No, I most certainly am *not* ready. Where is Ivan?"

The boy gapes at her like a fish out of water. "Um…*I've* been told to escort you…"

"And I'm *telling you* that I am going nowhere without Ivan. He's my-" she halts for a bare second there, because she realizes how absurdly possessive she's about to sound, because inside her heart the word *mine* echoes. "He's *my* guard. Have someone bring him before I pitch the largest fit you have ever witnessed."

"*Sankta, please-*"

"Have you *not heard* about how destructive I am?"

He pales and scampers off like a rabbit, off to hopefully do her bidding. Perhaps her bitchfits have become legend amongst the *Corporalki* by now. Good.

The chill wind blows at her hair as she stubbornly waits to be attended to. And why shouldn't she have Ivan, the way she always has? Why should she put up with having someone new being thrown her way? Perhaps it's her age showing; maybe she's going to become a bloody

wicked bitch and treat everyone the way Baghra does. Just because she can and because she is their *elder*.

Even if she doesn't look like it yet.

"Being difficult before noon? Why am I not surprised?"

The voice makes her shoulders ease, tension draining out of her immediately. A familiar hand helps her up into the coach and when he enters behind her, the interior fills with the scent of his cologne. Alina tries not to inhale it into her lungs too obviously.

"I wasn't about to have some inexperienced boy escort me to a warzone," Alina comments to him with a bit of schooled snootiness in her tone.

His eyes catch hers and for a moment, her heartrate picks up. It's stupid. He knows and she knows and the tension grows thick. He's been avoiding her, since that morning they illicitly shared. Once again, he doesn't trust himself with her.

Which is just so typical of him.

"Is that the only reason?" Ivan asks flatly.

They've not been together, since that day. She's felt his gaze on her though, many days, hunger in his eyes. The feeling of his power crawling over her, feeling her. Wanting her. He's played with her pulse at dinner before, just to torment her, driving all her blood south to the point where she feared she would *actually orgasm in front of the whole dining room*.

Other than that, he's kept away from her and her room. Very precisely. Alina finds that odious, because clearly, he thinks he made a mistake going to her bed. He got slapped into place by the loyalty bug again.

Inhaling sharply, because she doesn't need to explain herself to him, doesn't need to explain how she simply *wants him* to guard her now, Alina replies airily, "What other reason could there be? Can you…think of one?"

His jaw clenches and he shifts in his seat, as if trying to adjust a certain part of him without the use of his hands. Proof that he's already thought of some reasons. Proof that he's aroused by a few, if not *all*.

The coach jolts forward and Alina wonders if Aleksander didn't plan for Ivan to travel with her. In fact, she can almost bank on it.

Ivan's been avoiding her and she's been idly chasing him, so having him sit down just across from her, inches away, has her heart beating faster. Other parts of her warm and swell with yearning. She's accepted and come to terms with accepting that she misses him and there's no shame in it. Misses the life they had, away from all this mess.

…and honestly, she really misses what's between his legs. He'd probably preen if she told him that, so she won't.

Ivan notices the change in her physiology, naturally. There's no hiding anything from him. Especially not this close. His nose flares slightly, as if he can inhale her arousal. He says nothing about it, and she's not going to bring it up either. He brought her back here, he's the one who's been playing at not wanting her on and off since he brought her back.

First he's cold, then he's burning hot, then ice cold again…and he needs to make up his mind.

She never promised she'd stop wanting him. Sure, she told him she hated him and wanted to kill him, but she never said she'd *not want him*.

After a few minutes of listening to him grind his teeth, the uncomfortable way he glowers out the window hatefully, Alina says innocently, "Is there a problem?"

"Don't play stupid." Ivan's voice is rough and he won't look at her. "You know what you're doing. We're in a coach. *Surrounded* by guards."

"Oh, I'm doing something?" Alina shifts on her seat, uncrossing and crossing her legs artfully. She leans back against the wall of the coach and presses her hips down into the seat in a slightly indecent way, as if it will alleviate the ache growing inside of her.

Ivan watches her do this with fire in his eyes. He's torn between anger and lust, the line very thin with him. "I ought to bend you over and ride you until you're raw," he grits out, pupils taking over his irises.

"What's stopping you?" Alina replies, feeling her nipples prickle in her brassiere.

His eyes narrow, flickering out the window, to gesture to their accompanying escort. "You know what."

"So?"

"They'll *hear* us," he protests.

"Since when has that ever bothered you?"

His lip curls dangerously. "It's one thing to screw in your bedroom, but this? Are you *trying* to taunt him? I won't be party to *your games*. You know how fast rumors spread in the Little Palace. What do you think they'll say about us?"

*Your Corporalki already talk about us, you detached oaf,* Alina finds herself thinking with amusement. *Karyna literally walked in on your fingers inside of me.*

Alina sighs and coils that about in her mind. "Oh, very likely something grand and risqué." Her voice goes falsetto. "'*Did you hear? The Darkling's heartrender was shoving the Sun Summoner's face into the coach cushions and she squealed like a common whore the whole way*. *And not just once, but twice! Can you just imagine-*"

"Enough." Ivan crosses his arms over his chest, eyes flashing. "This is no joking matter." His pupils are dilated widely and his breathing has shifted. Alina can see his interest growing down his thigh, swelling in the leg of his trousers.

“They’re terrified of you,” she utters, staring him down fearlessly. “All you have to do is tell them you’ll crush their hearts if they in even breathe a word of this. Illya thinks you’ll kill him if he so much as breathes wrong.”

She’s right and he knows it.

Unable to stop herself from fantasizing, she imagines Ivan thrusting into her, taking her body the entire way to the *Fabrikator* worksite. The place between her thighs grows wet and heated, her body ready and eager for him-

“Show me,” he demands finally, his resolve crumbling into dust.

Alina plays dumb, just to irritate him. “Show you what?” She grins playfully.

The darkness in his gaze deepens and his lips curl into that vicious, unkind sneer of his that makes her core heat. “Your. Cunt.”

At those harsh words, said from his lips, Alina feels herself grow wetter. Her dress feels too warm under her *kefta*. “How do you propose I do that?”

His eyes travel up and down her form, undressing her with his gaze. Ivan takes his time, lingering on certain areas of her body. Alina grows impatient and raises her eyebrows imperiously. Her voice turns demanding. “Well? Tell me what you want.”

Exhaling hard, Ivan says, “Unbutton your *kefta.*”

She does it slowly, her fingers traveling down her front very carefully. She revels in the way his jaw clenches, his hands clenching and unclenching on his thighs. When she opens the *kefta*, revealing the dress underneath, Alina stops, waiting for his next command.

He enjoys being bossy, after all.

Seeing that she’s not going to budge without his say so, Ivan commands, “Uncross your legs and spread them. Lift up your skirt. *Now*.”

Alina lifts it to her knees, just to be difficult, because he didn’t specify where to lift it to.

Ivan frowns. “Higher. Put your heels up on the seat and keep your legs open. I want to watch you touch yourself.”

A pout. “Is that all?”

“That’s all,” he says forcefully, as if convincing himself.

It’s a vulnerable, exposed position, and yet it only makes Alina feel more excited. They’re in a coach, surrounded by guards. Anyone could peek inside and catch them. Her breathing shifts, becoming rough, her chest heaving.

When he orders her to move her smallclothes to the side, Alina delicately uses two fingers to fully expose herself to him, pink, wet, and swollen. Glistening.

He groans like a dying man, his eyes pinned to her center. Ivan's throat works and Alina knows she has him right at the end of his rope.

"Are you sure you don't want to?" She whispers, feeling powerful and desired, simply from the hungry, yearning glance he's passing over her folds. "Don't you want a taste? Or, maybe I should just…wait…until I see the General."

That snaps something inside of him, like a bull seeing red.

Ivan leans into her space and presses her up against the wall, his fingers stretching her, making her squeal at the suddenness of his action. "Oh no. Bad girls don't get licked. They get fucked. Turn over." She does, breathlessly, *eager*. Her heart is pounding in her skull, and maybe it's his heart, she's not certain.

Sometimes, she can't tell, these past few years.

She hears him fumbling with his belt and trousers, but within seconds his cock is sliding inside of her, making her cry out in ecstasy. He groans loudly. "You're so wet already."

Alina presses her face into the seat and gasps, trying to adjust to the feel of him again, feeling her insides flutter with excitement. "*Yes.*"

He thrusts in deep, out and then in again, one hand on her hip, the other buried in her hair, kneeling on the floor behind her. Ivan grunts, grinding his hips into her rear, his cock jumping inside of her, flexing with hunger. "Is this what you like? Playing my whore?" He hisses the words in her ear and somehow it only makes her tighten around him, making Ivan groan deliriously.

It's rough and hard, as she imagined it would be, just how she craved it to be, with him. He's angry and jealous and hateful and she can feel it with every thrust.

Her rear slaps against him with every rough stroke, and her insides sing with delight, hugging his thick length. "Ivan, *harder*," she gasps out. She's so close already.

He grunts, pumping into her, spreading her cheek to watch where he disappears into her, exciting him further.

Ivan curses under his breath a few times. "I'm so close," he rasps. "Are you-?"

"Yes. *Ah*. Can you...can you touch my-?"

Alina can practically hear him smirk. "Yeah. Saints, *yeah*."

It doesn't take her long, when two of his fingers use their combined slick to press inside her from behind, taking her in *both* places, filling her completely-

Alina presses her face harder against the seat cushion and tries to muffle her scream as she climaxes, clamping around him so hard that Ivan releases with a low, filthy groan.

When they finish together, they sag against the seat, still intimately connected, Alina nearly seated in his lap, her back still to his front. He's still hard inside of her and the swollen flesh of her core is aching from so much blood residing there.

Despite his earlier hissed cruelties, his lips drag across her neck and he inhales the scent of her hair. "You're torturing me," he whispers. "You're making me want what I can't have, Alina."

His hands tighten on her waist briefly.

"I want you to have me," she replies, her voice a little husky. "You know I do."

"I want to share your bed again. I want to move back into your room," he whispers, almost inaudible.

That makes her heart hurt, just a little. "You know you can't. And you'd be angry on the nights that I wasn't there with you." His teeth grind together at those words and Alina touches one of his hands, entwining her fingers with his. "But…I want that too. To be with just you again. In our apartment in West Ravka."

There's a soft rumble in his chest and he squeezes her to him gently, a small hint of affection. He kisses her softly.

The coach hits a bump and he curses under his breath. "There's no way they didn't hear."

Alina scoffs, dismissive. Most of these are her guards; Illya and Edik are easy to deal with. "What does it matter? All queens have favorites."

Ivan rolls his eyes. "You're not a queen."

"I'm the bloody Sun Queen and you belong to me."

He sneers against the nape of her neck and his hunger for her clouds his mind, clearly, because his next words are criminal. "No. We've been over this. You belong to me-"

She tries to reach behind her to cover his mouth, but is largely unsuccessful. "*Shhhh!* That has no bearing on what I've told you. *You belong to me*. That's *it*. *He* can't ever hear you say otherwise."

Jealously, Ivan scrapes his teeth against her throat. His cock throbs inside of her like a brand and Alina's stomach drops with hunger once again.

"Now, enough talking. You have one job right now and I can tell you're ready again, so…get to it." She wiggles her hips, feeling the solid fill of him growing firm inside of her.

Ivan makes an exasperated noise, as if his hips *haven't already* begun their eager rocking with the movement of the coach.

~*~

Illya and Edik don't say a single word to her about it, though it's clear by the way they won't meet her gaze that *they know*. In fact, Alina would almost suspect that they may have driven the coach the long way once they realized that Alina wasn't quite…*done*…with Ivan after the first time.

Perhaps she should thank them for not awkwardly interrupting them by stopping in the middle of camp. What a conversation that would be. *Oh, could you close that door? Not done, clearly.*

They seem to wither into themselves as Ivan steps out of the carriage after her in his full regalia, hat and caped *kefta* in place. His intimidating gaze sweeps over them threateningly. "Make sure the Sun Summoner's tent is set up properly and secured," he snaps at them. "Find me when you're done and I will check your work."

"Of course, Sir." They say it in tandem, scurrying off to do his bidding.

It's almost funny. Her being the Darkling's consort (of sorts) never scared them, but Ivan makes them shiver in their boots.

In the distance, just beyond the gathering of First and Second Army tents, Alina sees a new, gigantic skiff, rising in the distance. It's huge, larger than the old ones from years ago, able to carry more soldiers and provisions for a longer trip…a trip through a nation.

Alina's stomach fills with dread. The Darkling's new tool of war, made to bring terror and destruction to Ravka's most hated enemy.

Fjerda.

Being able to sense her emotional distress, Ivan looks at her from the corner of his eye. "Don't cause trouble, Alina."

"Don't tell me how to behave," she replies coldly, shivering. All the fire in her veins fading away. It's fascinating how quickly she can be reminded of what he supports…when he could support her *instead*.

That makes an ugly emotion grow inside of her. Ivan must feel it and know it's directed at him, because he leans down and says unpleasantly, "You will do as I say, because *I'm in charge of you*."

"Are you?" She asks with ice in her tone. "I *outrank* you."

"That may be so, but you are quite dedicated to being…*untrustworthy to the cause*."

She can't argue with that logic, because it's true. She doesn't support *the cause*. "Yes, well, the cause is awful. It's wrong. *You* are on the wrong side of this."

He makes a derisive noise. "You never change."

She could say the same for him.

Alina is not in the mood -despite the fact that he utterly satisfied her body- to discuss their opposing politics right now. So, she changes the subject. “Did you bruise me?”

*“What?”*

“Did you or did you not bruise me?” She asks in a quieter, disinterested tone.

His jaw goes square. “I did.”

“Fix it. Now.”

She sees the way her words anger him more, jealousy mixing in with his own irritation at her sudden mood change. He wanted to leave love bites on her and now she's asked him to remove them.

He places a hand on the nape of her neck and she feels the warmth of his power glide through her, pushing away the bruises his hands and mouth left on her inside the coach. As he’s doing so, Aleksander approaches them from between a line of tents, a few of his Grisha following behind him.

His expressive, dark eyebrows rise up, seeing Ivan’s hand on her nape. “Is something wrong?”

Alina can’t even get a word out, because Ivan answers for her.

“The ride gave her a stiff neck, *moi Soverenyi*,” Ivan replies brusquely.

The Darkling gives Alina a very flat look that she returns boldly, daring him. “I’ll bet it did.” His voice is drier than a desert without rain. He holds out his arm to her. “Come, Alina. Time for you to see what I’ve been building for you.”

*I don’t want it*, she thinks. *And I’d use the Cut to destroy it if I didn’t need it to enter the Fold and bring it crashing down to pieces.*

As she takes Aleksander’s arm, stares up at him, she thinks, *the long game is almost over, love. Either I end it or I die trying.*

*There is no other way this time.*

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** Um, what on earth did I just write? O.o

I swear, there was plot hidden in here somewhere LOL. Anyway, comments and kudos are loved ♥
Will I finish this in 1 more chapter? Gee, I hope so, but no promises at this point...
***ALSO:** You know what this means, now that I've finally reached this point in the

fic? It means I'm going to be posting the Aleks/Alina/Ivan deleted scene, probably tomorrow in honor of TGIF, in the deleted scene fic. o.O OMG 🥵

**ALSO:**
I'm still personally laughing at the dinner scene. Like, Aleks and Ivan gang up on poor Alina and she's just like, 'you assholes, why do I fuck either of you ingrates?' I cannot XD

Other notes:
These two lines were directly from the show in the final episode. I find them to be very telling.
*Alina: "I should just tear this down now."*
Aleksander:"And what can you really do on your own?"

Also: the the 'moi soverenyi' spelling is one I have been going between often, but I finally went into the books and confirmed that it is indeed 'moi soverenyi', not moi soverennyi.

# Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The military encampment around the new skiff is purely for the purposes of protection for the project, even though they are relatively far from Fjerda's borders. Alina imagines the effort was to keep Fjerda in the dark, unknowing of what was coming for them.

Oblivious to the Darkling's final, terrible plan.

Aleksander walks her up to the new skiff, large and looming, nearly complete with every last detail. Large, dwarfing the old skiffs of the past, more enclosed to protect against attacking *volcra*. The sails are enormous and Alina imagines a group of skilled squallers will be needed to move it forward.

It's a long way to travel with a skiff so large. The squallers are going to be exhausted. She notices there are multiple squads of blue *keftas* in the encampment and she can only assume this is why.

She gazes around at the remarkably large skiff, eyes taking in every detail, every piece of fine craftsmanship that the *fabrikators* have put into it. They walk around it, listening to one of the new *fabrikators* chatting away about all the features and new improvements, geeking out. Aleksander is pretending to seem absolutely fascinated.

He's not. Alina can feel his full awareness on her, even as he nods to the *fabrikator*.

They enter inside of the monstrosity and the ridiculous, farce of a tour continues. Alina leans against the Darkling and says sweetly, "I suppose you believe that I should be impressed by this vulgar display of power?"

Aleksander escorts her around the deck, as if they are taking a stroll together in the King's gardens. They go down the stairs to the lower floors, looking at all the gathered supplies, set to support a small garrison for many days. "That would be suitable."

She squeezes his elbow gently and smiles brightly. "I despise it."

Sighing with elegance and poise, Aleksander tilts his head back and stares upwards, briefly. "I am largely unsurprised, love." He looks downward at her once more, staring into her eyes as he dismisses his accompanying Grisha. "All of you, leave."

"Does that include me?" Alina points herself, being a brat. "May I go too?"

"What do you think?" He replies coolly, unamused.

All the other Grisha leave the skiff quickly, leaving them alone.

Alina steps away from Aleksander and circles the space, eyeing everything, hating the feeling inside of her, telling herself that she can't Cut this to bits, she needs it to carry her into the Fold, one last time, even if she wants nothing to do with it.

She'll have to end it all.

"So, what's your plan? Enter the Fold with this…overlarge contraption and work tirelessly to expand it across all of Fjerda? Just, destroy it all? And for what?"

Aleksander remains silent, listening to her vent. He's good at that, the whole not interrupting thing.

Pacing the other way, Alina says, "The squallers are going to be spent early. Did you even think to bring enough, before they burn out? Or does that just not matter to you? It *probably doesn't*-"

Her pacing must seem frenetic, because his soft, smooth voice sounds out again, "Alina. *Love*. Be still."

Despite herself, she pauses, trying to cool her chaotic thoughts, her mentally stressed plans. She catches his gaze, sees the way he's watching her, his expression intense. It makes her lungs catch, because he seems hungry, now that he's got her by herself and suddenly, she knows what he wants.

They're alone, by design. With intent.

Alina takes a step backwards, then another, until her back is against the skiff wall. He follows her, very slowly, like a midnight predator, his face serene but for the ravenous expression in his eyes. "I know this is trying for you," he says to her, gently stroking her face when he stands over her, watching every expression she has.

"Then why-" her voice cracks, because she's asked this a thousand times before.

"I'm securing our future." He presses his forehead to hers, gaze all-consuming. "No longer will their witch hunters plague us."

"Aleksander-"

"Say it," he utters to her, his lips so close to hers, hovering. Magnetic in his dark, terrible beauty. "*Ask me*."

*Say what I want to hear,* echoes wordlessly, coiling around them.

The air goes still in her lungs. She knows what he craves.

"Kiss me," she whispers softly, knowing. Innocently, even. "Kiss me, please."

The Darkling's eyes go ever darker, ever hungrier. "You're everything I ever wanted," he says lowly. "Remember that, if nothing else."

He towers over Alina like some sort of dark lord, eyes like beautiful pools of sin. He slowly presses his mouth to hers, pressing her against the wall with his body, sending her heart racing like a rabbit, pounding, the world feeling like it's no longer beneath her feet.

Despite all the hatred, all the dispute between them, he's always made her feel this way.

Want, hatred, desire, none of these feelings have morals, so when he lifts her up on his hips, his mouth growing insistent, needing more from her, she doesn't even *remember* why she might want him to stop.

She doesn't remember, even if she'll hate herself for it, after.

~*~

While plans are still being made to move the skiff forward, the final touches being placed, Alina doesn't even have to try very hard to avoid Ivan. Many of her nights are spent with Aleksander and she assumes that's by design.

He's not stupid, the Darkling. There might have been no marks on her flesh when she came to him out of that coach ride, but he knew just by looking at her face. He knew when he pushed inside of her later, against the skiff, felt the leavings of another man inside of her.

He could feel the softness of her channel, still swollen and sensitive, and utterly wet as he took her against his new weapon for waging war. Claiming her inside of it, another ode to his control of her and everything around them.

…and even if the sight of the skiff made her sick, she still came helplessly around his cock, milking him to completion as he groaned into her neck.

*"It's just one more move," he said roughly in her ear as she pulled herself off his manhood, afterwards. "It's only one more awful deed, my love."*

*"It's never just one more," she'd replied, feeling guilty.*

~*~

"You know," she tells him as they lie together in a bed of furs, a few nights later. His tent is grand, opulent. "There are times when I wish I had met you long, *long* ago. Before you ever caused all this ruin and horror. Your mother said you were decent, sweet. Once upon a time. I should have liked to see you that way." She runs her fingers through his hair, vacantly admiring its quality.

Aleksander looks down at her, propped up on his elbow as he does so. He's magnificent, his body a perfect specimen of the male physique. His eyes are glittering with darkness and years and years of knowledge.

When Alina was younger, she always put it down to him being older than her- she didn't know how much older he *really* was. She didn't know he was eternal, already hundreds of years old. She couldn't even fathom his mind or how it worked.

She's beginning to understand now and she hasn't even lived one hundred years yet. It's no wonder he's so inhumane. It's a shame that revenge twisted him into this…this monster. This shadow of who he might have become, once.

She likes to imagine he would have been a good man, had vengeance not found his soul and twisted it.

Aleksander's running one of his large hands down her body, lost in his own thoughts. She wonders if he's crafting a pretty sounding lie, one that he thinks she'll want to hear…or if he's searching what remains of his soul for the true answer.

Finally, he presses closer to her, pressing her into the furs again. "If you had known me then, someone would have killed you to hurt me…and I would be right back in this very same place. Fate is cruel. Unjust."

"Do you think you would have still loved me?" She asks, feeling his lips dance across her flesh, making her hyper aware of her body. She trembles, unable to control the urges of her body. Her body doesn't care about evil men; it enjoys how they make her *feel*. "Back then?"

He places a hand over her heart.

"I would have loved you better," he whispers into her hair, inhaling the scent of her, even as he fills her slowly once more. "And you would have died for it."

---

---

The days and nights pass as preparations to start the journey continue forward. Most of her time has been spent alone or with Aleksander. She's been lucky that Ivan has been tied up with duties, likely at the Darkling's command.

He's been kept busy, running a tight company of Grisha and preparing them for what comes next. Alina's seen him in the distance, many times. She's torn between missing him and being glad that they haven't been together since they arrived.

It pains her, knowing that he throws himself into this without question, because he *believes in it*.

She wonders if he thinks of her. If he wants to be near her, if he understands that Aleksander has kept him busy, just to keep him away from Alina. Perhaps he's even kept himself busy, knowing how angry she was when they last spoke, when he told her to *behave*.

When he told her to not go against the grain. To be a well-trained Grisha soldier.

As if. Ivan knows she's never behaved a day in her life.

Her heart aches, like a lonely wolf howling on a mountainside. *I miss him, none the less.*

She misses his sarcasm, his absurd ego that doesn't fit in any room, she misses the way he holds her in bed. The way he craves affection, underneath that hard exterior. The part of him that no one else sees. The way he keeps her warm in their sheets, the way he fills her, fills her almost too much-

The way he told her that he's in charge of her.

Her thoughts come to a furious halt. *Damn you, Ivan.*

---

---

There's finally a night that comes where Aleksander's watchful eye is elsewhere.

Aleksander hasn't asked for her to keep him company, so busy with his maps and his scheming, so Alina decides to slip her tent for some harmless enjoyment, to slip who she is and what she's expected to do.

She strips out of her *kefta* and formal wear, rips out her hair ornaments, anything that designates her as some special Grisha. Or a Grisha at all. She hops into some utterly bland clothes, something First Army soldiers would be more familiar with.

Alina puts her hair into a simple bun at the nape of her neck, military style, and crawls out from under her tent flap on all fours. Out the side, because Edik and Illya are guarding the front and the back. It's almost too easy. Haven't they heard what an escape artist she can be? No? Apparently not.

Or, they just don't care, because they pity her. Could be that, too.

Wandering through the large encampment, Alina easily makes her way over to the large sprawl of First Army tents and campfires, where regular soldiers are gathered swapping stories, eating their standard food, and gambling with whatever they have.

*Ah*. She's missed this.

Most soldiers don't look at her twice. Many haven't seen her in such normal clothing, have only seen her dressed up like some beautiful doll. Her face is fresh, without a stitch of makeup, without her hair done up. It's fascinating, being anonymous. She *loves* it.

Alina ends up stopping beside some First Army soldiers playing cards. "May I join you?"

They stop laughing and joking to stare at her in curiosity. A few don't recognize her, but two of the middle-aged men do and respectfully gesture for her to take a seat. She does so with a sweet, friendly grin. "Thanks."

One of the younger men gives her a slow glance over his cards, eyes a pale green. "Are you any good?" His uniform coat is lying on the floor, suspenders hanging casually on his

shoulders.

Alina laughs. “Oh, I’m bloody terrible. But I have money.”

That earns her a few chuckles. “You’re welcome here then…but you might lose your paycheck.”

“Good thing it’s big then,” she jokes.

Someone laughs, deep from his chest. “Can’t be better than mine, Private. And mine isn’t *that* good.”

They deal her a hand of cards and explain the game to her. Alina doesn’t win often, but she doesn’t completely lose every round either. She plays and drinks with the men, telling them how terrible the ale tastes. “This is as bad as I remember it,” she says with a snort, a small slip that reveals her as not being who she appears. Luckily, it goes over most of their heads, aside from the ones who already know.

“Tastes like piss. All the time.” A dark-haired man says, placing down a card.

The younger man next to him places a hand on Alina’s thigh, just above her knee, and she raises an eyebrow at him. Interestingly enough, she doesn’t even have to reprimand him, because one of the older men says sharply, “Don’t manhandle her. There are plenty of other willing girls for that.”

The younger man grins widely at Alina, blue eyes sparkling, “My mistake. Are you not willing?”

Alina opens her mouth, thinks about what to say, then she laughs. “It’s not that I’m *not*...”

He looks at his companions with a ‘*see*’ expression on his face. Another guy leans over and says to him in a hushed voice, “FYI. That’s Alina Starkov.”

Sliding his hand off her thigh very slowly, Blue Eyes stares at her in shock before glancing at his hand, as if it’s been blessed by a Saint. “Holy shit. I mean, holy…Saint?”

Alina shrugs and winks saucily. “I didn’t mind, sweetie.” The men laugh as Blue Eyes blushes like a tomato. “A copped feel never hurt me.”

She wins a cigarette on her next hand and she puts it in her mouth, allowing one of the men to light it for her, leaning in close. It always tastes and smells better when she’s had an ale or two.

“Is it true that you live forever?”

“Seems to be that way.” She chooses a card and sips from her truly bad ale. Her cigarette balances precariously in the corner of her mouth, which impresses a few of the men, because they seem to forget she was a regular soldier, once. She’s missed this about the First Army. The simple comradery. The bad food. The bad habits. The dubious people. The disorder.

The being mostly normal.

“Just how old are you?”

“Saints.” Alina has to think about it. “I’d have to do the math; I don’t know off the top of my head anymore. Definitely over eighty, I’d say.”

One of the Corporals raises his eyebrows at her. “Damn, I bet you know a thing or two in the sack…” he trails off, staring at something beyond her shoulder.

“Crap,” one of the older men grumbles. “Now you’ve done it.”

“What are you doing?” Ivan’s voice washes over Alina like a cold ice storm. He must be standing directly behind her, hovering like a gargoyle. Was he listening in? Was he watching? *Ugh, Ivan.*

Not turning to look, Alina stares down hard at her cards. “What does it look like? I’m playing cards.”

He leans down over her, taking the cigarette out of her mouth with a noise of disgust, snapping, “Your cards are shit. Come on. *Up*.”

With a simple flick, he drops her cigarette and crushes it under his boot. Alina sighs and considers arguing that she wants to stay, but she knows Ivan won’t leave her with them, now that he’s decided to be bossy.

It would be a strike against his masculinity if she refused to listen to him, in front of First Army soldiers…and knowing how he feels about the First Army, it would be best to avoid damaging his ego.

Slowly getting to her feet, Alina does a terrible curtsey to the men she’s been playing with, saying, “Thanks for keeping me company, gentlemen. Goodnight.”

They all nod to her, the Blue-Eyed boy saying flirtatiously, “You’re welcome *any* time.”

Ivan stiffens and shoots a very nasty look at him, but Alina walks away, knowing he’ll follow her if she removes herself from the situation that he doesn’t approve of.

When they’re a good distance away, Alina stops and faces him. “Am I needed for something or did you just not like me smoking and drinking with a bunch of First Army soldiers?” His face hardens predictably and Alina scoffs. “Get over yourself. I’m dressed like a boy. Not that it’s a problem for *you*, the whole boy thing, but for them-”

“It didn’t stop one of them from feeling you up. *And you let him*. Just can’t get enough, can you?” He says coldly. “I don’t know why you waste your time with nobodies-”

“What have I told you about saying rude things about the First Army?” Alina retorts, barely having a moment to think of how to scold him for calling her a loose woman.

Ivan sneers slightly, looking away, biting off whatever other nastiness is on his mind. “Come to my tent,” he drawls instead.

Alina stares at him and wants to grab him by the nuts and squeeze until he squeals about it. First, he’s calling her a dirty slag, then he’s asking her to bed? *This man!* She’s angry at him, has been avoiding him the past few days, furious that he claims to be in charge of her, hates that he’s so excited to see the ruination of Fjerda and-

*UGH*. Fine. ***Fine***. She’ll give him what he wants and she’ll go about her business. If he just wants to get off, that’s bloody *easy*. “Where is it?” She asks him dryly, unsurprised when he quickly drags her off in the other direction, heading to a large crimson tent. He’s eager, she can feel his excitement jumping under his bones.

…and yes, she’s missed him as well, but that excuses *nothing.*

When they enter his tent, she pushes him down roughly onto his cot, kneeling between his legs on the floor, ripping open his trousers. He’s already hard, the way she knew he would be. Wordlessly, she sucks him down before he can even say a word.

Ivan’s hand goes into her hair, messing her bun while the other goes upwards to grip the edge of his cot. His head tips back, mouth shifting into a dumb grin of pleasure, moaning her name. Alina deepthroats him the way that he taught her, the way he likes, swallowing and flexing her throat around his cock, occasionally coming up slowly for air. Messily licking his tip, pressing her tongue into his slit.

She loves the taste and smell of him, but right now this isn’t for her, because she’s mad at him, newly reminded of his alliance against her. How can he expect her to just…ignore that?

“Oh. *Oh,* Alina,” he gasps, hips moving in delight against her mouth. “That’s it…*so good*… you’ve gotten so good…”

She likes how his thighs tremble with need, the way he’s panting.

Alina hums around his length, spurring him along, feeding his arousal while doing her best to ignore her own. It’s tough, to ignore her own body when she enjoys hearing him vocalize how pleased he is by her ministrations.

She loves listening to him, and the sound of his voice, raspy with need; it makes heat flash inside of her. Her core throbs with want.

*This is not for you*, she tells herself, forcing her arousal down, trying to ignore its existence.

He’s so lost in his pleasure, spread out the way he is, that Alina could slit his throat, if she were so inclined. This is how she gets him on his back, gets him weak, if nothing else, *panting and desperate*. If he knew how submissive he looks right in this moment, he’d be out of the tent in a flash.

“I’m going to…now…” he grunts out, hips rolling a little roughly against her face. His hand tightens in her hair. “Swallow me?” It sounds like a request instead of a demand, and

unfortunately for him, Alina has other plans for how this night goes.

This is about hurting him, the way he's hurt her.

His cock pulses, hard and hot on her tongue.

Alina pulls back so that he spends in her mouth instead of down into her belly. She does this for the sole purpose of her next demonstration. Before he can even form a single thought or coherent sentence, Alina leans over to the side and spits his seed onto the floor, casually wiping her mouth as if this is something she does every day, and stands up.

Wordlessly, she makes to leave the tent.

Ivan's still sprawled, dazed with the aftermath of his pleasure, but he becomes aware quick enough when he senses her leaving him. "W-wait…*where* are you going? What about you-? Alina, *stop*, stay with me-"

His trousers are around his boots and he's in no position to get up and chase her down.

Alina looks at him over her shoulder and reminds herself what he so cruelly said to her when they first arrived at the encampment. *You will do as I say, because I'm in charge of you.* She has to remind herself, so she doesn't change her mind and crawl back into the bed with him, to stay with him as he asked.

…because she really, *really* would like to stay with him, wants to feel his mouth between her thighs…

Firming up her shoulders and her resolve, Alina says, "You've gotten what you wanted. I'm sleeping alone tonight. Goodnight, *Corporalnik*."

He looks like he's been slapped.

She knows that she's been nasty. Alina is well aware that she's just been cruel to him, spiteful. She knows he simply wanted to be with her, to pleasure her too, and spend the night with her in his arms, confirming to himself that even though he's been cruel to her, that she still feels affection for him.

…and now Alina has cruelly denied him that. No more shall she pretend for him, not now. This has all come to the very end, to this very terrible place, down to Aleksander's bloodthirsty plans.

Maybe Ivan should think more about kneeling to her instead of kneeling to Aleksander.

She'll reward him then.

---

---

The more she denies her body of him, the more her libido slips into her slumber.

*She retreats from an empty bed and makes her way through the darkened halls. When she comes to the door she's been looking for, she knocks loud enough to wake the dead. For a moment, she fears he'll not open up, because he'll recognize the sound of her heart. Only, after moments of waiting, it swings open, revealing Ivan's cantankerous gaze.*

*"What are you doing here, Alina?"*

*She opens her mouth to reply, because she isn't sure herself, but she needs-*

*He grabs her by the wrist and instead of pushing her away from his doorway the way he should, he yanks her inside.*

*"You smell like him," Ivan mutters into her neck. "How can you come to me smelling of him?"*

*"Dear Saints, Ivan. Did you really expect anything else? Honestly, I'm not sure why it even bothers you-"*

*He cups between her legs, massaging her until she feels her insides melt. He rasps, "Shut your whore mouth."*

*Even in her dreams, he's his authentic self. Unbelievable.*

*"Says the master's faithless dog who made it that way," Alina replies cattily, taking no offense, clutching lustfully at his clothes.*

*"I didn't make you a whore; you came to me that way." Now, his tone holds a sly edge. Almost teasing.*

*She tries to kiss him on principle, laughing as he strains to keep his head away from her. Eventually, he gives in.*

*Whispering into his mouth, Alina says, "Would you prefer I smell like you?" At those words, Ivan makes a low noise in his chest, the last bits of his restraint melting away. Eventually, he pulls her under his sheets, tearing at her clothes like a man starved.*

*He whispers words against her skin, things that echo deep inside her soul, things that she feels rather than hears…*

It's a nice dream, but only a dream none the less. She wakes alone, wishing he wasn't her enemy, wishing he was in bed beside her, the way he always was in West Ravka.

Alina is certain he'd be pleased to know that he haunts her dreams, because she still refuses to let him haunt her bed.

---

---

The dreaded day finally comes, like a storm, falling over the horizon.

The squallers board the skiff and begin moving it, pushing towards the distant Fjerdan border.

The encampment moves like a sea of ants, following after the skiff as the completed beast moves slowly across the land, a whale out of water, slowly struggling.

It takes a few days, but eventually, the Fold looms like a dark blight on the land, just in the distance, crackling with malice.

Waiting for them.

Waiting for Alina.

---

---

As they make their new forward base just beside the Fold, getting some rest, preparing supplies and soldiers, making final plans to enter in a few days hence, Alina spends more of her time within her tent. In solitude, or as much solitude as she can manage, thinking through every single thing Baghra has ever told her, thinking through all the old texts about amplifiers, *merzost*…

Even with her own newfound strength, she still feels weak. She still feels like she doesn't have a chance. Maybe that's the problem; doubt still plagues her. She truly believes that Aleksander is *better* than her.

She's given Edik and Illya orders that she wants no one to bother her, in this stressful time and they've done a rather good job of sending everyone away.

Alina needs some calm before the storm, because if she's to crash the Fold into bits, she needs to be of an open mind.

She can't afford to be sucked in by Aleksander's false promises, nor can she afford to be swallowed by Ivan's passions. Keeping herself separate from both has been a task all on its own. At least Aleksander has given her space, these past few days, having seen her behaving herself earlier in their journey, but Ivan…well…she's felt the heat of his gaze on her, more often than not.

The hour grows late when she hears the man in question making a fuss outside her tent. "Step aside, boy."

Illya sounds quite nervous, but stands his ground admirably. "S-sir, she wants no visitors. The Sun Summoner has forbidden entry."

“That doesn’t include me,” Ivan says arrogantly, tone dark.

“It does, *actually*,” Illya replies a little waspishly. Perhaps too waspishly, because Alina hears him yelp in pain moments later, followed by Ivan storming into her overlarge, queenly tent.

He’s like a storm cloud of blood, standing there in his caped *kefta*, eyes piercing her from under his hat. “I’m not allowed?” Ivan says the words in a dangerously quiet tone, expression scathing. “*Is **he**?*”

“You are not to harm my *Oprichniki, Corporalnik*,” Alina scolds shortly, returning her gaze to her desk, where she’s sitting in her nightgown. She underlines another note of hers, something to remember and to keep in mind around the practice of amplifiers and how tethers work.

“You’re avoiding my question,” Ivan grits out, eyes burning with far too many emotions for Alina to count.

Well, he asked, it doesn’t mean he’ll like what she says. “He’s the General. He goes where he pleases.”

There’s only a slight pause before he comes unglued at those words, the way she knew he would. She just didn’t know how bad it would be.

“So, that’s your game now?” Ivan sneers, eyes flashing crudely over her. He steps further into her tent, coming to lean over her intimidatingly, mouth aggressively at her ear. One hand on her desk, the other on the back of her chair. “You go to bed with him for sweet words and nice kisses, but you only summon me when you’re looking for a hard fuc-”

She hits him for that, eyes wide and hurt. “How dare you. Don’t cheapen-” Alina had been about to say ‘us’ but that…that doesn’t work. She knows she treated him callously only nights ago. “You know it’s more than that. For us.” Usually.

Turning her face away, upset, wishing things were different, wishing he wasn’t on the other side of this war she’s been caught in for decades. Saints, she wishes he wasn’t *against her*.

“How can I know that?” He says nastily. “How can I know that it means anything to you?”

Is he being purposely thick-skulled right now? Alina wants to scream until she can’t scream anymore. She wonders if that will make the pain inside of her disappear, if only for a short while. “You can look inside me, can’t you?” Alina replies numbly. “Does it feel like I don’t care about you when we’re together? You’ve fucked people you don’t care about, haven’t you?”

Probably a very, *very long time ago*. He probably doesn’t even remember what it’s like. Good. For. Him.

She imagines he would have been the type to have forgotten someone’s name and face within five minutes of being done with them in the sack, before he and Fedyor were an item. Before

he settled down. She's certain she's not wrong; Fedyor mentioned that Ivan was different, before they got together. Arrogant and unimpressed by literally *everyone*.

*{"Saints, the way he acted, you would have thought it was a privilege to touch his cock. He went through a few Grisha like tissues." Fedyor told her, laughing. "He was all like, 'get down on your knees and kiss my feet, and maybe I'll decide to fuck you'. You weren't gonna get a thanks, just a 'there's the door' and, yeah."*

*Alina was largely unsurprised by this statement. "Good grief, I would have told him to kiss my feet or bust his load elsewhere…and you ended up with him, how?"*

*He chuckled, that saucy sound that Alina liked. "There was a time that even I didn't like him, you know. Ivan…well…he's pretty rough around the edges."*

*Alina leaned back in her lounge chair and popped a champagne strawberry between her teeth. "Is he? Oh, I've never noticed that."*

*"Sarcasm is fascinating on you," Fedyor replied. He waved away another Grisha, one who was trying to approach them. "He was way worse, when he was younger," Fedyor said. "Like Big Bad. I think he ground my face into the dirt like, maybe three times in one training session and then asked if I needed a break to fix my hair. Or write a letter to my mother. Something to that note."*

*Alina finished the bottle of champagne with a pout, glaring upwards at the blinding sun. "You chose a winner, Fedyor. Slow clap." She then slow clapped, but terribly.*

*He scoffed, uncorking another bottle with a surprisingly loud pop. His voice was only slightly defensive when he replied, "Well, he got better, after I worked my magic on him."*

*"Suuuure, he did."}*

Ivan's jaw tightens at her harsh words, throat working, eyes going harder. Despite the fact that what she said got to him in the worst way, he doesn't look away from her. "I'm only with you, Alina. I only *want* you. Even if…I'm not the only one in your bed."

Those words hurt more than a thousand needles, stabbing into her.

Alina's throat tightens. Her voice barely comes out a whisper, "*I know*." Why is this so hard? Why does it hurt like this, just being near him? Why does her body ache for him to just hug her and dismiss all their problems?

"If that's the case, why won't you let me stay?" His voice changes, sounds a bit strained. "I can…I can be gentle like he is. I can try harder-"

Alina closes her eyes, feeling like an ice pick has just been shoved through her heart. Something about him showing any weakness makes her feel horrible, because he's not weak, he's never weak, and when he is…it's for a reason. Her voice is sad, aching. "*Stop.* Please don't say things like that."

She doesn't want to hear him think he's less than Aleksander. Alina never wants him to feel less, even though his ego deserves being knocked around, no doubt.

“Why are you pushing me away? You’re refusing to see me and-”

It’s all too much and it all burns right out of her. “Because I can’t look at you right now without seeing him. Not with that awful contraption outside, not with the Fold just in walking distance. It’s like lead in my damn heart, weighing me down, sinking me.”

His face contorts in frustration, gesturing with his hand towards the exit of her tent, in the direction of the Fold. “This is how we secure Ravka-”

“This is how we commit genocide!” Alina snarls. “I won’t have it and if that bothers you, please, by all means, get out of my tent.”

He goes deathly still, like snake waiting to strike. Hackles raised, like a wolf. “Fjerdans killed Fedyor,” he says coldly.

“And you’ve killed your share of them. How many, Ivan? Do you even know anymore? Or have you lost count? I know I have.” Alina shakes her head, distraught. “All this death and killing just goes round and round, so on and so forth into eternity. When does it end? They don’t all deserve to die.”

Ivan paces slowly, eyes pinned to hers. “This will end all threats to us forever.”

Sickness pools in her belly. Her voice is empty of emotion as she says, “I’ve heard that lie so many times. From his lips to my ears, over and over again, until it means *nothing.*” Alina shakes her head, feeling more numb by the second. “Even now, you still choose him. You still choose the man that put me in chains.”

“Why wouldn’t I support the man who has given me everything?” He asks it coldly, lip curled. “Why would I turn my back on him for a little girl who has never even liked being Grisha?”

A pin could have been heard dropping. Alina runs a nail down the side of her neck, hard enough to leave a red line. The momentary pain grounds her, keeps her from leaping across the space between them to wrap her fingers around his throat.

She examines her nails, very briefly, swallowing down the murder inside of her. She’s getting better at it, but it’s things like this that make her want to treat him the way she used to.

“Sometimes, I really question myself for being in your presence.” Her voice starts out quiet, only to rise violently in tone with her emotions. “Saints, you’re like an *affliction* and *I cannot rip you out of my veins!*”

“I’m familiar with that feeling,” he says mockingly.

“*Oh, good for you*,” Alina replies viciously, sarcasm dripping from her tongue.

“You refused your power! You didn’t even want it! He did as you asked-”

“I told him that I could control it. I told him I changed my mind!” She points a shaking finger at him. “Aleksander had no right. None. He omitted what it would mean, what he planned to

do. You were right there. Watching. *Helping*."

"You were unwilling to do what needed to be done. You're still that way. That's the only reason he needed to do it in the first place."

"Are you sure?" She asks him quietly. Mordantly. She returns to her desk seat. "Are you *very* sure? Because I think, that if I had questioned his actions even once, *ever*, he would have locked down my power and made it his. He wouldn't risk losing what he's been waiting for."

Ivan's face is stony, cold, but she sees a flicker of discomfort in his gaze. He steps up to her, looking down at her face. "I don't want to talk about this," he says shortly, evading the problem as if it will just magically go away. He comes up behind her and wraps his arms around her, brushing his lips along her neck, sending sparks of awareness through her. "I didn't come here to argue. Bring me to your bed. It's been days and I need you…"

A part of her wants it. Another part is just…too wounded. Too tired. Too distracted by what she knows is coming and what she's going to have to sacrifice.

His kisses along her neck grow more insistent, hungry, hands feeling the weight of her breasts, trying to elicit passion within her, but instead of lust, he must sense the agonized beat of her heart instead. He pauses and utters questioningly, "Alina?"

She hardens herself, because it's the only way.

"If you insist on staying in here, I'll fuck you, but it won't be because I love you; it will be because *I don't*. And you will feel *the difference*, I promise you that. You have no idea, no inkling of what it's like to be me. It's easy for you to dismiss my struggles. *That's fine*. I can dismiss your wants just as easily."

*You want me to love you and ignore all the bad, but I won't.*

Ivan steps away from her as if burned. His mouth pulls into a snarl. "I've nearly forgotten what a vile bitch you can be."

"Sorry to surprise. I am what you've all forced me to be." She gives him a very unpleasant smile, accompanied by cruelty in her eyes. "*So*. Are you staying tonight? Shall I get down on my knees now? Or later?"

With a very hateful glance, he turns around and storms out of her tent.

When she's certain that he's out of hearing distance, she chokes back a sob and digs her fingernails into the place above her heart.

Karyna arrives a few days later and she spends time walking with Alina around the military encampment. They can see the Fold, rising in the distance. “What a hideous thing it is,” the young healer says to her.

“Isn’t it? It’s haunted my dreams for the better part of a few decades.”

Shaking her head, Karyna mutters, “I just can’t imagine what that’s like. All this horror… dealing with it for decades. I don’t…I think I understand you now. Why you are how you are.”

Scoffing, Alina replies, “I’m glad someone does. I grow so weary of it. Knowing it’s here, waiting for me. Always.”

Quite a distance away, Alina finds her gaze caught on a familiar form of red, growling out sharp commands to different Grisha. Her heart clenches at the sight of him and she can’t help the sudden wave of yearning that washes over her.

Their last fight was ugly and she feels it every time she catches sight of him.

Karyna sees where Alina is looking. “We’ve all been avoiding him, if possible. His mood has been absolutely foul,” Karyna replies. “More so than usual.”

Alina sighs. “I’m afraid that’s my doing.”

The other woman nods, kicking at some dirt under her boots. “Somehow, I figured that.” Karyna gives her a sly glance, somehow playful. “Can’t you like, just throw him a bone and send him on his way?”

Grimacing and laughing all in the same breath, Alina replies, “I’m afraid that simply doesn’t work with him. He’s…*ah*…very emotional about what goes on in between the sheets.”

Karyna giggles, covering her mouth, glancing around in case she sounds undignified. “Him? Sensitive? Doesn’t like the old hump and dump? Needs a cuddle with it too, or it just isn’t worth it for him?”

Alina fans herself with her hand, her face hurting from smiling. Saints, *it’s true*. If he was one for screwing and leaving in his youth, he certainly isn’t for it now. “Oh, you’re too much for me, Karyna.”

The healer smiles with genuine happiness at Alina, hands in her pockets as they continue walking. Alina’s *Oprichniki* are many paces behind them, just in case some Fjerdan spy happens out of nowhere, coming to end her before she unwilling ends them all.

They pass closer to the Fold, listening to the awful crackling sounds that it makes, full of darkness and terror. Karyna shudders. “I’ve never been this close to it before. It feels…evil.”

That’s because it is.

“Tell me,” Alina asks, gesturing to the skiff and the Fold. “Do you think this is right? To make all of Fjerda suffer?”

Karyna seems to flinch, looking around them nervously, even though there's no one close enough to listen to them, aside from Illya and Edik. Both men are pretending to ignore them. She fiddles with her red *kefta*. "I'm not sure it's my…place to say…anything. I don't want to get in trouble."

Ah, the noose of the Darkling. No one wants to go against him, the way it's always been.

"You won't get in trouble with me. Say whatever you want. I'm curious." *Just don't say it too loud.*

The younger woman goes quiet, picking at her fingernails. Then, she finally exhales and barely whispers, "I think it feels wrong. I'm a healer, I don't want people hurt…that's why I am *what I am*."

A strange jolt of emotion pulls at Alina's heartstrings. It's been such a long time since she heard someone speak out against what so many had accepted as the norm. She's well aware that most Grisha are still told the stories of how they could be executed for being born the way they were, just for being Grisha, without the protection of the Darkling, but Alina hasn't seen proof of that in decades.

No, doing something right in this world for everyone is probably the only thing that will cast Grisha in a good light once more. Fedyor knew that. Fedyor had hoped that the destruction of the Fold would come in his lifetime, that he'd see people be glad for the Grisha instead of having hatred for them.

That day never came and Alina hates that she wasn't strong enough to have given it to him. The thought burns in her chest painfully, searing. She doesn't even know if she'll be able to make it happen this time, but at least she won't go on living if she fails this round.

"Do you think others think like you, Karyna?"

Blue eyes shadowed, Karyna nods slowly, looking over at the camp. "There are. But…it feels wrong to not support this…the General has made the world safer for Grisha. He protects us from…"

"From what?"

Karyna pauses, seemingly stumped. "*Um*. Our enemies?"

Alina snorts, kicking at nothing. "The only thing he's doing is increasing his own stranglehold on the continent. He's power hungry and he'll never stop. Not unless I-" Alina cuts herself off sharply. "Enough of that."

They fall silent, the weight of Alina's words, her thoughts, hanging in the air between them. Karyna isn't oblivious, not now; she knows how tortured Alina has been since returning to the Little Palace. She's not blind to the reason, not anymore.

"He's watching you again." Karyna utters after a bit.

Alina looks over at the camp, towards the Grisha training section and sees Ivan's body turned towards hers, but his face is averted, giving her his strong profile instead. "He's not."

"He was. His heart is so stupid whenever you're around, I could shoot him in the dark."

Well. Good thing the *Drüskelle* aren't *Corporalki*, else Ivan would be dead. "What's he sound like?" Alina asks curiously. "I can't…well, you know. I'm not *Corporalki*."

They stand in place to talk and watch the Grisha move through some of their fighting forms, all under Ivan's hawkish gaze. Karyna leans to whisper in Alina's ear, "He's normally very steady. Low blood pressure, low beats per minute. He's not phased by *anything*. That's until he sees *you*. I can't even describe it, it's like surfacing for breath after being underwater for too long. Just this…this big gasp of energy, of life, like an inhale. And then," Karyna huffs a little laugh out. "He gets all mad, blood pounding in his temples, as if he's just so irritated by whatever you're doing, until it evens out into a giddy beat, the way my old roommate used to sound when she saw puppies. Like, he's *just fawning* over you. I'm telling you, he's so loud and absurd and *he needs to stop*."

"That's…almost flattering? I think?" Oh, Saints. And all the *Corporalki* know, don't they? Alina is just going to die.

"It's obvious he feels strongly for you." Karyna sighs. "Why've you pushed him away?"

Alina stares at the proud cut of Ivan's shoulders as he barks commands at a few soldiers. "He's a product of his upbringing, I'm afraid. It's very hard to change a man so set in his beliefs. His beliefs are not mine."

"Is that why he's been so unbearable?" Karyna inquires, very perceptive. "He wants this… and you don't."

"That about sums it up and the story is as old as dirt. He and I have a saga."

"That's rough."

Ivan turns his head in their direction and Alina feels his gaze on her, feels his small science brush against her, pricking at her heart. It's nearly the equivalent of a small child, pulling at her hand, asking for her attention.

Or, it would be, if it weren't for the burning look in his gaze. He doesn't just want her attention; *he wants her and he's mad about it*.

---

---

"Have you been happier, love?" The Darkling's hand strokes across the back of her neck, like shadow. "You seem to have finally…settled. Calmed."

They are in his tent, the large, well-furnished thing of elegance and power.

His fingers are in her hair and Alina allows him to massage her scalp the way she likes. Even after all these years apart, the Darkling still knows everything there is to know about her. There are no true secrets…at least, never for very long. "You seem well, all things considered. I'm pleased," he tells her. "I trust we will have no…issues, tomorrow?"

"I'm your slave, what choice do I have?" She says spitefully, hating the way her body still reacts to his, as if electrified. "I can only do as you command. If it were up to me the Fold would be long gone."

"*Progress*," he whispers to her softly, his lips on her ear. "Years ago, I would have had to have you chained in here, with a guard. Perhaps time on your own has done you some good. I hope your good behavior continues when we enter the Fold to do our work."

Her insides twist at those words. The very idea of going into the Fold to expand and move it does not fill her with any sort of joy. The idea of fighting to tear it down fills her with a sense of desperation and pressure.

Do or die.

As if sensing her reluctance, Aleksander says, "Don't cause trouble tomorrow, Alina. It has been a long time since anyone has seen the Sun Summoner work with the Darkling. Together, we are a force to be reckoned with. Do not give the people the impression you are *unwilling*."

*A bit late for that, love*, she thinks dryly.

"I'm sure your favorite dog will keep me in line," she drawls, thinking of all the times in the past where Ivan had stood just behind her, ready to twist her up in case she chose to defy the Darkling's orders while inside the Fold. In fact, he did, many times.

With careful hands, Aleksander slowly slides her *kefta* off her shoulders.

Her clothes follow shortly after, pooling on the ground in a heap.

"I'm sure he will," Aleksander says with all the confidence of a tiger. "I may even reward him, afterwards. What do you think of that?"

"What am I, a party favor you'll dangle in front of him?"

He lays her down and covers her body with his own, whispering, "If it keeps him in line, why not? I don't *have* to let him touch you at all, you know."

Alina turns them over harshly, sitting astride Aleksander's hips. Imperiously, she looks down at him. "That's funny. I don't have to let *either* of you touch me."

The Darkling's mouth chuckles even as his eyes spit displeasure.

---

That night, one the eve of horror, a strange dream visits Alina. One so vivid that it hurts, burning inside of her like true agony of the flesh.

*"Take it back, orphan." Zoya's standing over the graves, her midnight hair whipping in the violent wind. Her eyes are spitting righteous fury, a tiger to her very last. "Take it back before the darkness consumes everything."*

*"I can't. Why do you think-"*

*A flash of pain sparks over her left cheekbone where Zoya strikes her hard. "Stop lying to yourself! You've always been more than who you think you are.* ***Break free****."*

*She places both hands on Alina's collarbone, uncomfortably digging her nails into the delicate flesh stretch tightly over the collar. "Accept it. It belongs to you, not him. The door of power goes two ways," Zoya snarls, but her voice sounds like Baghra's, disturbingly so. Alina makes to step backwards, away from the pain of Zoya's nails, but in a flash Zoya disappears in a burst of light, leaving her in silence, standing in snow alone.*

*It's cold. Icy. Snowflakes touch her face, melting into her skin. The kisses of winter. Her collarbone is bleeding profusely and it aches, it hurts, as if her bones have been laid bare.*

*The Stag stands before her, eyes soft and liquid black. Alina feels her shoulders sag and she reaches out a hand, wanting to bury her fingers in that beautiful pale coat. Fingers shaking, she feels the softness of the coat, feels the strong beat of a heart under her palm. Power blooms inside, more power than she's tasted in an age.*

*It feels like hers. She can almost taste it on her tongue.*

*"I thought you'd left me," she breathes in awe. "I let you down. I let him take you from me."*

*A certain flame burns in her chest, burning until it nearly hurts, as if her body is too small to contain whatever is within her.*

*Alina gasps, but doesn't remove her hand. For a moment, the pain is nearly blinding.*

*Then, everything goes golden white. Then, there's darkness.*

*There's a doorway, ancient and ornate, made of bone and antler. It creaks open, revealing nothing but shadow; Aleksander's shadow. Alina reaches out a hand to slam the door shut, but then she sees the shadows seeping into the light, on her side of the doorway.*

*Instead of closing the door, she opens it and reaches out a hand and* ***wants.***

*The shadows crawl to her, as if she's their master, pulls strength to her that doesn't belong to her, because the door goes both ways-*

She wakes with a start and suddenly, *understands*.

The next day, the sun is bright in the sky, even as the Fold repels it, a plagued sight against the golden sunrise. Alina dresses in her solemn *kefta* and wears it like it's something she'd wear to a funeral.

Her funeral.

The Grisha have gathered, preparing to board the skiff, waiting to hear from their General, waiting to hear his inspirational words. It makes her ill, listening to it, watching the various faces.

Aleksander does his grandstanding. His voice is soft, charismatic, yet somehow it carries across them all. "Today, we make history. Today, we end the largest threat to Ravka…and to all Grisha. The Sun Summoner will help protect us as we expand the Fold over Fjerda… removing the threat of their witch hunters and their wars against Ravka. We will be victorious!"

There are cheers from various groups of Grisha, just as there are also solemn, quiet looks from others. Alina sees the line, where it's been drawn. Karyna was right; not every supports this cause, they just aren't vocal about it, too afraid to speak up.

That's fine. She'll stand up for them all when the time comes. That's what Saints do, isn't it?

She stands beside Aleksander, the chill wind blowing through her hair, watching as the different squads of Grisha and soldiers start entering the skiff, preparing for what they intend to be a long journey. He grips her hand and raises it to his lips, saying, "Today we close one door and open another one in history. Don't look so down."

Alina gives him a very dry look. "Are you telling me to smile?"

He huffs out what might be a laugh. "I wouldn't dream of it, love. It was only a *suggestion*." His power coils inside of her, like a whisper, a reminder that she's his to do with as he pleases.

She has to refrain from pushing him out. Now that she's discovered the two-way path between them, understands that the tether is not one-directional, it's hard to refrain from shutting the door on him.

Saints, she can't wait to see his face when she does though.

Ivan approaches them, his eyes on the Darkling. Aleksander tightens his grip on Alina's hand, refusing to allow her to drop his hold. "Report?"

The Head of the *Corporalki* nods shortly, his eyes glancing over where Aleksander is holding her. His eyes dart to Alina's face and she feels his look deep in her bones, feels his

heartrending dip under her skin, as if to say, '*I have a hold on you, too.'*

This feels like a game of tug of war and Alina bites back a sigh.

"Ivan?" The Darkling says, tone going a little sharp.

He looks away from Alina to focus on his General. "Sir. The squallers have boarded the skiff and the *Corporalki* chosen for the mission are assembled already. We should be ready to depart."

"And our supplies?"

"We should be stocked for up to two weeks, Sir. If it takes that long."

*Oh, it won't*, Alina thinks. *I don't plan on it.*

Aleksander looks upward, considering. Then, with his typically short, ersatz smile, he says, "Excellent. Take the Sun Summoner up and get her settled, won't you?"

Ivan turns his inscrutable gaze on her, "Of course, *moi Soverenyi*."

Aleksander drops Alina's wrist as he saunters away, making his own path onto the skiff, cape billowing ominously in the wind. It's fascinating that he doesn't want to be the one to force her onto the skiff, as if it makes him less of a villain.

He's *always* made Ivan do it.

As with every time prior, Ivan takes her arm and walks her up into the skiff, escorting her, making sure she boards it. They've done this together so many times before that Alina almost forgets why this time *will be different*.

She feels his heartrending creeping into her, trying to calm her pulse and the minute she feels him doing it, she orders him to quit. He's never done this before and distantly, she knows he's doing it because he cares about her, thinks he'll make this easier on her if she's numb.

Too bad this time, Alina doesn't need numb. She needs *wrath*.

"Don't. I don't want to be soothed," Alina tells him.

"I want to soothe you."

She shakes her head. "Stop. Now."

He gives her a dark look out of the corner of his eye, causing Alina to sternly tell him, "Respect my wishes, Ivan. If you ever expect to be invited into my bed again, anyway."

That gets him to flush, just a bit, hackles raised. She hears someone choke back a laugh and Ivan turns his anger on the unfortunate soul, snapping out, "Is something funny? Get to your post or I'll send you up with the squallers and have them hang you out for the *volcra*."

The laughter dies quick.

His power drops away from her, allowing Alina to be as anxious and angry about her situation as she wants. Small victories.

Ivan stands beside her as the final few squads of soldiers board the skiff, towering over her, scarlet and stony. The familiar scent of him fills her nose, wintry and fresh. She tries not to inhale too deeply.

The calls for 'all clear' go across the deck, where they stand under a lovely glass roof, as if it will make them safer from *volcra* attacks. It's all for show.

The team of Squallers go through their intricate motions and push forth the gigantic sails of the skiff, moving it forward into the Fold. Alina feels her throat go tight and she grimaces. It never gets easier, entering this accursed place.

No matter how many times she's done it, it still makes her skin crawl and her bones wither.

As soon as they enter the smokey, inky blackness, Alina feels the shivers start creeping over her. The Fold is an evil, terrible place, and the very air tastes like poison. The screeches of *volcra* sound out, horrid and scratchy, piercing, even in the distance.

"How can you stand it?" She utters to Ivan, watching as the shadow embraces them.

His jaw clenches, looking every place but at her. "It's something called duty. Learn it, Starkov."

The Fold is a place of nightmares and it's been Alina's home for many decades. It's been her cross to bear, knowing she was never strong enough -*never wanted it enough*- to end it all.

She was never prepared to give her life…and maybe that's been the problem all along.

Alina scoffs at Ivan. "Don't Starkov me. We all know that's not what you call me between the sheets."

"Shut. Your. Mouth." Ivan grits it out.

"Everyone *knows,* no sense pretending now. You're loud enough."

He gives her a dirty look, leaning down to whisper directly into her ear, "…and how do you think it looks, that I've been barred from your tent? If *everyone knows*."

"Oh, is your pride hurt? Is that why you've been such a terror to everyone? Your ego always was a little too large," Alina drawls.

He makes a frustrated noise under his breath. "Enough."

They go silent, looking forward.

Aleksander's dark cape is motionless, giving him a regal aura as he stands proudly at the front of the deck, many feet from them. He's looking upward, into the darkness, as if admiring what he created, basking in his obsidian filth.

He looks at home, within the Fold.

When he's done admiring what he's created, he gestures for Alina to comes closer to him, to stand by his side. Lifting her chin, ignoring Ivan, Alina slowly walks to the Darkling, every step echoing in her head. Every step brings her closer to this terrible end.

The time is ticking slowly.

She hasn't gone against Aleksander in many years…but she's stronger now. Knows more… and she has nothing left to lose.

*Nothing, except Ivan.*

Alina pushes the name away, because he isn't hers; he's still Aleksander's. Ivan might want her, but he *doesn't believe in her*.

When she stops beside the Darkling, he gazes down at her with what he likely *believes* is love. False sympathy, as if he cares that this is hard for her, to be made to do this over and over again. He presses his forehead to hers, briefly, whispering, "I'm sorry, love."

"You're not," she replies. "You're only sorry that I don't want this, too."

His jaw tightens and his eyes go colder as he looks down at her. "So be it." His hand grips her collarbone, resting on her amplifier possessively. "It matters not. We have a job to do."

*Indeed.*

Aleksander dips his power into her, with the intent of using her. The sensation is wrong, feels wrong, knowing that he's going to *take* from her. Instead of bending to his will, instead of allowing it to simply happen, Alina balks, gripping her own strength tightly.

He notices, giving her a warning look. He can feel the way she is rejecting him and his control. "What did I tell you about behaving today? *Everyone* is watching."

"Good," she hisses, gritting her teeth. "Maybe they need a reminder that you aren't King."

He pulls on the tether between them harder, beginning to force her small science out of her body, trying to make it his. "Watch your mouth, Alina. Now is not the time to rebel."

"Really? I think it's the perfect time."

Aleksander pulls on the connection between them harder, causes pain to jerk in her stomach. "Just encase the skiff in light and protect us from being eaten. That's your job, nothing else."

"I'll encase the skiff," Alina replies threateningly. "I'll encase the entire Fold until there's *nothing left*."

With a sneer, an expression that so rarely ever crosses Aleksander's face, he slams her small science out, weakly encasing the skiff in light. Weak, because Alina has successfully kept most of it to herself, a realization that causes her to smile painfully.

He's not fully in control of her and she hasn't even gotten started. She's going to take him for everything he's got, she's going to pull on his power, hell, she'll use *merzost* herself if she must.

"Ivan," Aleksander calls out coldly, eyes still boring into Alina's. He must see something he doesn't like in her face, blazing out from her eyes. "The Sun Summoner needs some motivation."

The sound of footsteps approaching is a distant noise in Alina's ears.

A strong hand lands on the back of her neck, a clear threat. She knows that hand, knows the feel of it on her body. In fact, she loves when that hand touches her, *just not like this*.

"Do it," Alina says quietly over her shoulder. "Make me behave. Isn't that what you live for?"

Ivan's hand trembles on the nape of her neck, a warm weight. "Do as you're told, for once in your life," he rasps, sounding pained. "It doesn't have to be this way. Don't *make* me do this."

Oh, he doesn't want to twist up her insides and make her scream?

Alina wants to tell him that she's not making him do a damn thing. She wants to dig her nails into his shoulders and press her teeth to his mouth, violence upon violence, need crashing down upon tormented need, but that's not what this moment is for-

"No," Alina says instead, feeling a sea of calm open up inside of her. Cold. Eternal. The Fold stretches before her and she'll have to do what it takes to tear it down. She cannot let her feelings for him get in the way. "That's not what you should be saying. You should be asking me not to hurt you. You should be begging my forgiveness. On your knees."

"*What?*" The confusion is obvious in his tone.

"You'll do what you need to do…as will I."

"Alina," his tone is rough, almost *pleading*, low enough that no one else can hear. Just like that, he's calling her by her name again, as if she means something to him, as if she matters more than duty and honor. "What are you talking about? Don't do anything stupid-"

She twists a bit, to look over her shoulder at him, gazing up into his dark eyes, eyes she's looked into a thousand times before.

"I'm done being a slave, Ivan." She whispers, even as she collects her strength. "I want to be free."

Realization dawns in his eyes, but Alina doesn't want to wait long enough to watch him make a decision. She's afraid that he'll choose Aleksander, she's afraid to see it, so she acts. It's now or never. Before he can gesture with his hands, Alina bolsters her strength and burns like a fallen star.

Ivan cries out and stumbles back from her, shielding his face from the sheer brightness and heat overtaking the entire deck in a blazing fire. Not only the deck, but beyond even the skiff, consuming miles of Fold, causing *volcra* to scream and disintegrates in flames.

Everything turns into chaos.

There are screams and shouts, Grisha wondering what on earth they are supposed to do, because it's *the Sun Summoner* and she's *unleashed* and everyone knows what she's like when she throws a tantrum. Or at least, many of them know and others have only heard through word of mouth. The First Army soldiers are staring in sheer awe, gazing at her, some of them making symbolic gestures, symbols of faith.

"*Sankta*," some of them whisper, reverent.

Through the madness, Alina briefly sees Karyna and a few others, like Olga, standing motionless, eyes darting between her and-

Someone whirls her around with a low growl of dark fury, turning her until she finds herself facing Aleksander, rage written across his features, like a painting of murder. "You think you can best me?" He hisses. "You know *nothing*. You can't do anything on your own."

"I know enough to do this," Alina replies coldly, concentrating hard enough to create the Cut from light, sending it at the ceiling of glass, shattering everything into pieces, sunlight pouring out from her body even as glass rains down. "I will destroy this skiff, piece by piece, until there is nothing left. After I'm done tearing your horrid legacy down to the ground." Her lip curls. "I'll reduce it to nothing but an old wives tale."

His lovely face goes tight, lovely even in his anger. "So be it. You will regret this. You will regret *everything*."

Then, he truly attacks her with his small science, filling her body with shadow and agony, trying to destroy her from the inside out. He's trying to make her kneel, to give up, but she's lived with pain for years and she can stand one moment of agony if she can finally make up for all the wrong she's ever done.

Their power clashes, wars between them violently. Aleksander's darkness screams inside of her, like claws, tearing at her organs, trying to regain its foothold on her, but Alina *rejects it*, rejects him and everything he stands for.

For a moment, she even feels him call upon *merzost*, a dark, sickly thing, hungry and always looking for sacrifice. Looking to be fed. He's trying to push it into her, as if it will weaken her enough to stop what she's doing-

-pain. So much pain, as if her veins are exploding, filling with mud and filth. The collar at her neck screams with agony, as if boiling in her flesh, trying to tear her asunder. “You are mine,” Aleksander snarls, eyes like blazing pits of the darkest hell. “You never stood a chance. The Stag belongs to me-”

For a moment, her light wavers and horror suffuses Alina; he’s winning. He’s taking everything from her again, she truly isn’t strong enough to withstand him, the Stag never was hers, the pain is taking everything from her and she’d rather die-

On the cusp of nothing, a vision comes to her, so still and peaceful. Timeless.

*The sunlight is just behind the lovely, proud Stag as it stands in the distance. Alina pauses, feeling a rush of emotions overwhelm her, remembering how she showed the Stag mercy, only to have Aleksander kill it right before her eyes. The crimson blood, spilled in the snow.*

*A proud animal, innocent of cruelties, lost to time.*

*Beside it stands a familiar face, a hand outstretched.*

*“Mal,” she whispers, voice trembling with emotion.*

*“Take my hand,” he says, his voice like balm for her soul. “Use your power. It belongs to you. Don’t be afraid. Take Shadow Man for everything he’s got. Including his power. You and the Stag are one, Alina. Don’t let him convince you otherwise…”*

*As he’s speaking, the pale Stag steps forward, forcing its antler into her body, disappearing into her. There’s no pain, there’s no blood, no tearing of her flesh…it simply becomes her, bolstering her sunlight.*

*Alina inhales, feeling too small for her own flesh-*

The vision blinks out of existence, replacing itself with the mix of dark and light swirling around her. The overbearing sensation of Aleksander pulling at her power, trying to use it for his own, as he has for decades.

A strange sort of calm suffuses Alina as she gasps for air. The Stag chose her. It chose to become her, not Aleksander. It did not choose his vengeance, his evil. *This has gone on long enough*.

The image of the Stag and Mal standing patiently, waiting for her in sunlight, fills her mind once more. *Use your power. It belongs to you. Don’t be afraid.*

Alina closes her eyes and envisions the thin line between her and Aleksander, envisions the doorway between them and swings it open. She pulls his power to her, yanks on his strength, bolsters her own. Tells herself, *this is all mine.*

The doorway goes two ways. The tether has an endpoint between them both.

Aleksander twitches, then frowns in surprise, looking down at her, flexing his hand in discomfort on her amplifier. “What are you doing? You cannot possibly…stop that. *Stop.*”

Stone-faced, Alina begins to weaken him, making his strength her own, stealing it to bolster her own strength. The brightness of her sunlight grows every brighter and larger.

There are whispers from various Grisha who watch on.

“Do we…do we stop her?”

“Is she going to kill us? Is that what she’s doing?” A voice, nervous and afraid.

Olga, a familiar voice. “She’s destroying the Fold, she’s doing what she should have done years ago-”

“That’s treasonous,” a man snarls. “It’s our weapon!”

“Maybe it shouldn’t be,” Karyna snaps back, punching him out.

“Sir,” one of the *Corporalki* yells to Ivan. “What are our orders?”

The stone-cold Head of the *Corporalki* doesn’t reply, his eyes trained on the two most important people in his life; his general and his treasonous lover.

“You cannot claim this power for your own,” Aleksander yells at Alina, clutching at his chest in pain, feeling her sucking power from him. “Your use of *merzost* will kill you, not just me.”

She almost didn’t realize she was using it to drain and suppress him. Perhaps that’s what that awful pain is she feels, the pain that she sees reflected in his gaze. Too bad he doesn’t understand that death doesn’t scare her.

The Fold continuing to exist is the only thing that *does*.

Alina stands regally at the bow of the skiff, hands clasped, eyes alight with her emboldened power, the sun blazing behind her. She looks like a Saint and feels like one for the first time in her long, unfortunate life. The air crackles with her righteous fury as she stares down at the Darkling. “Be silent,” she commands, voice strained as she concentrates on absorbing her amplifier once and for all. It hurts worse than she imagined it would.

It feels like dying.

She fights to make it one with herself, to deny that it was ever Aleksander’s by right. She makes it her own flesh and bone, truly. Her flesh aches and her bones scream as the foreign object melds deeper, ever deeper into her body.

Aleksander is watching in horror, eyes alight with fury. “This cannot be. You *cannot do this*, Alina.” He holds up his hand, where he placed the sliver of antler in his hand. “It doesn’t belong to you. This power is *mine*. You are betraying your people!”

Suddenly, he cries out in pain, the piece of antler in his hand cracking in half as Alina takes the amplifier truly into herself, feeling whole once more. She gazes down at all the shocked faces.

Power floods into her, more than she feels like she can contain. It burns inside of her, aching to be unleashed.

Raising her hands high above her head, Alina tells him with a voice as sharp as lightning, "The truth is, I *am* the Sun Queen, Aleksander…and you cannot command me. *Not anymore*."

The light shimmers and crackles like the fires of the sun. The Fold roars and shakes under the strain of Alina's unleashed power, the power she has finally accepted and realized as her own.

"Ivan," the Darkling snarls, eyes wide and furious. Black fills his veins as Alina's use of *merzost* fills him, *taking* from him. "*Stop her*."

The sounds of Ivan's name makes her heart trill, but she hardens herself, tells herself she cannot focus on anything else. The way she feels for Ivan has no place here.

Ivan will either stop her or he won't…but Alina isn't going to look. She's going to *focus*. She doesn't want to *see* him choose against her.

She tightens her hold on her power, strengthens her will and vaguely tells herself, *just end the Fold before Ivan knocks you out.* It won't be difficult for him, after all. She's only one target, and an easy one at that. A distant part of her knows he can kill multiple people at one time.

"Someone, restrain her," Aleksander yells to his Grisha, groaning in pain as he nearly collapses under the strain of Alina's strength against him.

There are shouts, some people coming forward, as if to grab her, and distantly, Alina thinks she hears Ivan's familiar voice, rasping, "…touch her and die."

She can't focus on that right now.

*End the Fold, end the Fold…*

Alina sends out the sunlight, envisions consuming the Fold in its entirety. It's time for the darkness to end; it's time for the horror and threat of death *to end*. It must be burned into ash.

For the first time, Alina is ready to take control of her fate and she's going to do it with two hands outstretched, bathed in beautiful golden light, to bright to even gaze upon, like a goddess in human flesh.

Or a Saint.

It hurts, her power, even as she consumes more from Aleksander, feels as if she's stretching herself too thin, even as she hears the moaning pain of the Fold around her, breaking under her strength.

Even as it feels like the Fold is weakening, Alina feels herself burning with pain.

*You're killing yourself*, she finds herself thinking, which causes her to push even harder. She stops focusing on keeping the Darkling contained; he's already weakened.

As if from underwater, she hears Aleksander saying, "…you traitor…you don't answer to her…stop her…"

Outward her power soars, filling every crevice of darkness, consuming it until there is nothing left, nowhere left for the darkness to hide from the sun-

There's a crash, like an explosion of sound, and Alina feels something give. It's the Fold. *It's breaking into pieces.*

There comes a sharp, terrible pain inside of her, feeling like everything is being sucked out of her, even air. Her power screams like a whirlwind, out of control as she gives it her all, pushes everything outward in one final bid to destroy the Fold once and for all, even if it kills her.

Even if she has to give everything, even her life.

Something seems to break inside of her, but then, there's a boom and crack-

Everything goes white and she knows no more.

~*~

The world sounds like it's gone underwater, buried beneath the True Sea. Lost to the waves and the undertow.

It's all so far away, in another life. Her body doesn't feel like her own. She's not even sure she's alive.

Alina body is weak, feels like it's on another plane of existence.

There are voices, echoing oddly, so far away…

"Sir, *please.*" Karyna's voice filters through Alina's stupor. She's pleading with someone, her voice pained and tight. "You have to let us near her. She'll die."

Yes. Is this dying? It feels about right.

She tries to open her eyes, exhaling weakly. This definitely feels like dying, like she could sink into nothing at any moment. It's so hard…to move. Alina fights to open her eyes, struggles, as if trying to wake from a dream that she can't escape.

Finally, her eyelids cooperate and she finds herself blearily looking upwards at a familiar face, a familiar set of dark eyes, strung through with chocolate and amber and forest. Her heart leaps, if not weakly, fluttering with feeling.

What she feels for him…

Ivan's looking downward at her and Alina realizes that her head must be resting in his lap. He's pale and drawn and his eyes are full of something that she can't name.

The sky behind him is full of sun, the darkness chased away.

For a moment, her heart soars. She did it. She actually…accomplished it. Finally. After all these years. But not only that, that's not the only thing that makes a weak smile comes to her face-

An echo in her mind …*she hears Aleksander saying, "...you traitor…you don't answer to her…stop her…"*

"You chose me," she whispers in awe, even through her exhaustion. She tries focusing on him and him alone. "You chose…*me*."

Ivan's head drops down, pressing his forehead to hers. He nods wordlessly, his throat flexing tightly, as if holding back emotion. His jaw is clenched, as if he doesn't trust himself to speak.

Alina never thought…she never thought he'd ever…

"Her vitals are dropping," Karyna says, begging now. "Sir, I won't hurt her, I just need to stabilize her. Please, let me near-"

He's keeping everyone away with his small science, Alina realizes through her fog. A violent reaction, a response to being afraid of losing her. Violent and unreasonable, driven by fear and feeling powerless. He won't trust anyone with her and that's just…so typically Ivan…

…she's so tired, why does it feel like she's slipping away?

"Alina," he's saying, dark eyes afraid, voice cracked with emotion. "Stay with me, focus-"

She tries to reach a hand up to touch his face, wants to feel his skin one last time, wanting to tell him that she's not afraid of death. She's accepted this outcome and it makes her heart soar to know that even if this is her end, he made the right choice for her.

He chose her and even if it was late, even if it took him forever, he still stood against Aleksander *for her*.

"Ivan," she whispers, wishes she could kiss him one last time, "It's al..right…"

He groans, as if he's the one dying. As if someone is plunging a knife into his heart. There's the sound of footsteps, finally moving towards them, shouts and people speaking rapidly.

She's too tired for all this. Alina feels like she's being pulled under like quicksand…

"Her blood pressure just dropped hard," Olga is giving medical orders somewhere, coolly. "Karyna, I need you to-"

"…the General is contained, injured bad, should we-"

“Is anyone…watching the border…?”

Hands are touching her everywhere, different sets of *Corporalki* crowding her.

“-we’re going to lose her…”

*we’re going to lose her…*

The last thing she hears before she fades into nothing is Ivan’s voice, whispering her name, voice broken under an emotion that Alina isn’t sure she recognizes from his lips…

Chapter End Notes

**Update 07/21 - I swear, I'm almost done with the next chapter XD I have 10,000 words written...it's almost here. birthday celebrations (not just my own) and the like got in the way all weekend, so I didn't get to write at all. Slowly catching up!!! Worst case, I will split the chapter so I can release at least half of it early, since I've made you wait quite some time...the chapter is getting long, so this is totally plausible.**

**AN:**
OMG!! So close to the end XD I cannot believe it you guys.

Comments and kudos are loved ♥

Also, if you wanted to read a snippet of some Aleks and Ivan backstory for this fic, head over to the deleted scenes story for this and go to the end of Chapter7 (I say the end of it in case you want to avoid the dysfunctional smut that's in that deleted scene). If you don't want to avoid smut, start in Chapter 6 XD
Also!!!! Fair warning, next week is mah bday week, so...updates might be delayed a bit, because it's a relatively big birthday this year and my old ass may or may not go on a bender, because I took off work XD

# Final Chapter Part I

Chapter Notes

**AN:** Yup, I split the darn final chapter. This is part I.

I really wanted to flesh out the final half more and add in my minor details. Due to me being behind schedule, I thought it was best to give you this part so you aren't waiting another couple days for the whole thing instead XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything is dark. Midnight fog and muffled sounds. Echoes of voices, a whirlwind of strangeness and smog. Suffocating.

Her presence feels like it's trapped in quicksand, maybe even underwater, a thousand leagues under the sea. She's so far down that she's even forgotten who she is and what she's *done*.

In this darkness, she's nothing and that fact makes her feel free and weightless. There are no more earthly concerns, there's no more stress, no more horror and dismay. She just…*is*.

It doesn't seem so bad, if this is death. She's lived long enough, hasn't she? She's suffered *enough*.

She wanders in the darkness for some time, walking through the curling, misty fog. Aimlessly. Without purpose. Time is without meaning here and-

A familiar person appears beside her, a face that strikes hard at her memories. She squints in confusion, recognition pulling at her strings. She knows this face. The name that goes along with it, the name that beats deep inside of her heart…

*Mal?*

He smiles softly, squeezing her hand in his. *Yes, Alina.*

Something burns inside of her, like a storm of sunlight and fire. *Alina*. That's her name, isn't it? She'd forgotten, mostly. Death is a funny place. Cold and empty of golden life. At least she's not alone; at least he's here with her.

*Are you staying with me?* Mal's mouth doesn't move, though his voice sounds out inside of her skull, as if speaking directly into her brain. How strange, how utterly odd this afterlife is.

At least it doesn't hurt here. She recalls so much pain, *so much heartache-*

Why would she want to leave here?

A part of her wants to stay wherever Mal is. This ghost from her past. She wants to soak in the darkness and the silence and simply fade from existence, to become a distant memory of the living. She's done enough, hasn't she? Suffered…she's suffered *a lot*.

She feels that, deep in her bones. A horrid, wrathful ache, vibrating in her marrow.

A strange doorway of light appears into existence just behind Mal, casting his form into that of a dark silhouette as he waits for her to make her choice. *Are you ready to follow me?* His voice is like the wind, soft and curling. *I've waited a long time, Alina.*

*Follow you where*, she wants to ask. There was a time that she would have followed him anywhere. She followed him into the Fold, into what she believed to be certain death, she followed him because she loved him and no one could ever convince her otherwise.

She would have followed him into the end of the world, if given the chance. This is something she recalls, old memories of her life, brilliant memories buried within her, full of pure emotion.

He pulls her towards the achingly dazzling light, as if to say, *it's time to go, Alina.*

Step by step, they walk hand in hand towards the door of sunlight, smiling until Alina hears a voice, echoing in the darkness behind her.

*{…please, don't leave me…}*

This causes Alina to halt, turning to look over her shoulder in confusion, staring into the darkness and the murky fog, hovering. That voice…she can't…quite remember who…

*Aren't I dead?* She looks at Mal in confusion, because if she's not, then what is this place?

He shakes his head solemnly. *Not yet. But, close. Once the soul leaves the body, the body usually follows it into death shortly after.*

She frowns. So, she's on the cusp of the end of eternity, faced with yet another choice.

*So, I can choose to live…is that an option?*

Mal's features shift into a confused frown. *Do you want to? After all that you've been through? Don't you deserve a break? Don't you deserve peace, after everything you've sacrificed for the Grisha?*

Grisha. Another word that brings strange feelings to her breast. A word linked to…losing her agency. Having her choices, her life, taken away with the flick of an elegant wrist and a flash of shadowed eyes…

*{…I don't want to lose you, too…}*

That voice, yet again, distracts Alina. It pulls at her, draws her away from the light, draws her back to the pain of her mortal flesh. She knows that voice and she tries so hard to remember

the face of the person that it belongs to, feels the way her heart beats a little stronger, a little faster-

*Who is that,* she wants to ask, feeling like a string is yanking on her heart, nearly painful in its strength. Every time she takes a step closer to the light, the pull grows even stronger, as if trying to force her back into the land of the living.

Alina presses a hand over where her heart might beat, in her mortal flesh.

*{…Alina…}*

Oh, the ache in her chest! A surge of emotion! She takes another step into the darkness, drawn to the one calling for her.

She's not ready, she determines. She's not ready to leave her body behind. If not just for herself, but for the person begging her to stay. Turning to look at Mal, Alina gives him an apologetic expression. *I'm sorry. I can't go with you. Not yet.*

He sighs, and yet he nods in understanding. Her fingers slowly slide out of his grasp, his touch a ghostly whisper against her phantom flesh. Mal begins to fade into the mist, the door of light closing behind him, barring the path.

Mal's confident, calm voice echoes as he begins to disappear from view. *Don't be sorry. I'll still be here, watching over you, for when you need me next.*

If his lips ghost over hers before he disappears entirely, Alina cannot recall. The weight of her decision crashes down upon her, weakness and the pain of her human body creeping into thought and memory. She's alive, but for how much longer?

The hazy darkness twists and eventually, an unknown amount of time later, she hears real voices, as if they are just beside her.

"Her vitals are better than they were the past few days. She almost slipped away-"

"…nothing to do about that hair though…"

"The hair is the least of our worries…"

"At least her blood pressure is stabilized again. She's maintaining normalcy, even without a heartrender next to her. That's improvement over the past week-"

*The past week?* Alina mentally wants to sigh.

Saints, she's too bushed to even keep breathing, yet somehow, she manages. She exhales slowly and slips into her dreams again.

~*~

It's still a fuzzy affair, when she comes to again.

It feels like she's not *really* awake, as if she's in some sort of fever dream, slipping in and out of consciousness. Someone is next to her, a warm, large hand holding hers. Shoulders and arms on her bed, a head resting on the sheets. Deep, even breathing, breathing that isn't hers. A person is asleep next to her. Alina wonders if she should wake them, but she's too tired to move her body, let alone open her mouth.

The person beside her smells of evergreen and winter. Chilly, crisp and cold. Strong and fresh. She likes that scent a lot-

An older female voice sounds out, disrupting Alina's thoughts. "…I really think it's time for you to leave…"

The body beside Alina stiffens, breathing shifting. "Don't presume to tell me where I should be." *Ah*. That voice. Very familiar, *very* stern.

"…your time is better spent being a leader. The majority of us are moping around aimlessly. She's fine. She's passed the worst. You, however, are needed elsewhere. *Out*."

A growl. The hand holding hers squeezes Alina possessively, unwilling to leave. It's touching that they don't want to leave her side, even with duty calling in the distance. Her fuzzy thoughts won't let her put a name to the voice, but her heart beats a little harder every time he speaks, because…because…

*Because you love him? Is that what that is?*

That can't be right, Alina doesn't believe in love…at least, that's what she recalls of herself.

"I will not-"

"For goodness sake, I will find you if something changes! You're a horrid mother goose. Terrible at it. Go make sure the maids are fixing up her suite the way she likes if you want to do something of value for her. Sitting here like a depressed rock *does nothing*."

The hand holding Alina's reluctantly pulls away after some thought, lips ghosting over her forehead, nose briefly touching hers…

~*~

Sometimes, she wakes and sees blurry images of people hovering around her. Sometimes, she feels the telltale sensation of a *Corporalki's* touch, crawling in her veins. Sometimes, it's a foreign feeling, detached and formal, someone she isn't familiar with. She's so weak, there's no way she could even stop or care about it, even if she tried.

Other times, it's coveting and hungry, clinging onto her in a way she understands, aggressive and overpowering. It's like the voice, the voice that thrills her, makes her body feel alive. A name burns into her mind, like cursive flames- *Ivan.* The sensation of his heartrending is wordless, soundless, but even so, it feels like he's burning the words *'you're mine, you belong to me'* into her veins, carving them into her very bones.

Everything is so distant. As if her life is a memory that she's trapped in.

Alina fades away, dreaming of golden fields.

---

---

This time, when she wakes, *truly wakes*, royalty is at her bedside, staring down at her with a tight expression. For a moment, Alina thinks she's still dreaming, because *how absurd*, why would the King be here-

*Because you destroyed the Fold.*

The realization is startling, like being thrown violently into an ice bath.

"*M-moi tsar*." Alina barely finds the words, her voice clunky and rough from a lack of use. Is that…is that her voice? Saints almighty, she sounds bloody awful! "What…" She coughs, as if getting dust out of her esophagus. "How…"

He's the spitting image of his grandfather, Vasily Lantsov, pale hair and paler eyes, staring down at Alina with a chill, icy coldness. Dmitri Lantsov is a relatively young king, still in his early thirties, his own father having passed early in life. Alina has heard the stories, the ones that say Dmitri is very much into riding horses and gambling, like his odious grandfather, but that he's also sharp witted, precise.

"You're awake. Finally." Dmitri utters unkindly, eyes roving over her form, outlined under her simple medical bedsheet. They appear to be in the medical ward of the Little Palace. "It's about time. The world hasn't stopped spinning just because you've needed your beauty sleep."

Alina coughs dryly, trying to clear her throat yet again. She always recalled him being rude, quite bracing. She's only met with him a few times, being as Aleksander always dealt with him, ruling behind the scenes. Despite that, Alina recalls Dmitri as quite memorable, due to his personality. She sits up the best she can, running her hands over her mussed hair self-consciously. "Apologies, I was under the assumption that I was dying-"

"You don't look dead to me."

Staring at him blankly, Alina drawls with a terribly rasp, "…because I'm not."

"Exactly. *Up,* you wily old hag. Get dressed, *immediately*. I'll send in the servants. You have a job to do for me. Nap time is over."

What on earth is the rush? Alina gazes at him, her mouth slightly open. Confusion crawls through her as her hazy mind tries to catch up to what's going on. *Where the hell is Aleksander? Why is Dmitri coming to me-*

Her thoughts go cold, stopping in their tracks. Memory rushes forth, filling her mind with exactly what happened on that skiff, what happened in the Fold before she destroyed it. Did

she kill him? Is…Aleksander *dead?*

A wave of sickness fills her stomach and she has to cover her mouth, least she vomit in front of the King of Ravka. Horror and dismay knife deep into her belly, ripping and tearing. What has she done? *What has she done to Aleks?*

When she feels that she can speak again, she asks, "What happened…with the Fjerdan border?" Alina feels anxiety push into her, reminding her of what they had been about to do to Fjerda before she destroyed the Fold. "With the Fold gone, there's no boundary-"

A certain amount of displeasure glitters in those blue eyes. "Funny you should ask. It's one of the main reasons I'm here, you see."

Dread sinks into Alina's breast, leaving her worried that there was an attack and if Aleksander is gone, everything falls to her-

"Have we sent anyone to speak with Fjerda?" Her voice doesn't sound shaky, thankfully. It seems her vocal cords are waking up. "To keep armies from mobilizing?"

"The dignitaries from Fjerda are already here," he says very blandly, the corners of his eyes going tight. "In the palace, this very moment. Waiting to discuss terms of how we move forward. I gather they are pleased that they can now travel again, out of Fjerda…pleased that you destroyed the Fold. But, they also loathe you and your Grisha. It's a tight little line we walk here now."

Alina closes her eyes and tries to center herself, seeking calm. "What do you need from me, *moi tsar*?"

A group of maids enter the room, holding a set of formal robes and clothes, though thankfully nothing that looks like a *kefta*. She wouldn't have wanted to wear one anyway. Alina has no desire to rub her status in the face of the Fjerdan's, people who are already skeptical of her.

Dmitri stands up, to his full height, looking down his royal nose at her, looking resplendent in his deep blue attire. "You will make them see reason and come to terms with us. The aggression towards our people must end. I don't want war with them anymore. Convince them it's unnecessary, that it was a gesture of good faith that we removed the Fold. Tell them that new…management…is in place."

Again, that dark reminder of Aleksander's strange absence.

Afraid of the answer, but needing to know, Alina hesitantly asks, "*Moi tsar*, where is the Darkling-"

"He's indisposed. Thanks to you." Dmitri's voice is slightly disdainful, but royalty is often that way, when speaking to their underlings. "So, get your glittering ass out of this bed and accompany me to the receiving chambers. We have work to do."

*So, he's alive. Aleksander's alive.* A strange sort of relief blossoms in her chest. She didn't kill him. She only hurt him, stopped him from continuing his madness. It's better that he's

wounded, rather than ended forever.

It would have hurt, to know she'd ended him, once and for all. Too many memories, some of them good, many of them terrible. Regardless, she'd loved him, *once*. His death is not something that she ever wanted, even in her worst moments.

"As you wish, *moi tsar*," she whispers, seeing the way Dmitri leaves the room, allowing the maids to help her dress, preparing her for what must come next. The women pull her into the small bathroom and quickly wash her the best they can in short order.

When she's suitably presentable, Alina joins Dmitri in the next room, where the King stands, arms behind his back, staring out the window. "I'm ready whenever you are," she says softly, deferentially.

He turns to look at her, eyes passing over her appearance quickly, nodding shortly in approval. "This will do. No need to incense them by dressing you in opulent gold like some Saint."

"It would offend them, if I presented myself as better," Alina agrees. "This should start us out on a calmer note."

Dmitri tilts his head slightly, appraising her. "I prefer your temperament, to that of the Darkling's. I heard that he was diplomatic, once. These past few years though…he's preferred a strong show of brute force and fear against the other nations. It's earned us no friends. I believe our enemies have hated him more than they hate Ravka. Perhaps you can change this."

Alina inclines her head to him slightly. The idea of taking Aleksander's place is appalling to her, but she doesn't let it show. "I will do what I can to improve the relations, *moi tsar*."

"I'm glad we understand each other. Come then. Let us go."

She follows him out of the room, trying to keep her calm, feeling slightly out of her depth, realizing that she's essentially in control of the Grisha now, if the King has come to her for help. She holds the fate of many in her hands.

While this is a familiar feeling, it's somehow different, this time around.

When they pass a mirror, a flash of white catches Alina's eyes. She pauses and turns to look, gasping at what she sees. She almost doesn't recognize her own reflection. With a shaking hand, she reaches up to touch her hair, to feel if it's indeed real, as if it doesn't belong to her at all.

"My hair is pale," she utters, staring at it in the mirror. Her eyes are a bright chocolate doe color, seemingly amber with the rich color of her hair, no longer dark. She looks the same… and yet different, all at once. Ageless, serene. A saint in human form. "What the *hell* happened?"

“What are you asking me for? Must be a Grisha thing,” The King utters dryly, glancing at her. “Don’t dawdle. Or, should I call for a walker for your elderly joints?”

Alina scowls at him. “I may be ancient, but my body is *just fine*, thank you for your concern.”

He chuckles sharply as they continue down the hall. “So, I’ve heard.”

Alina gapes at him, flushing red. He cannot be insinuating what she thinks he is. “What does *that mean*?”

“Even a King can hear rumors,” he replies, lips shaped into a smirk.

Unbelievable.

~*~

The receiving chamber is opulent and full of visitors, Ravkans and Fjerdans alike. The roar of many voices talking can be heard down the hall, like the angry buzzing of a hornets nest.

All murmuring ends when Alina arrives at the King’s side, standing beside him at his throne. Silence falls across the room, hundreds of eyes swinging to gaze upon the Sun Summoner, a rare sight beside the King. Everyone knows she’s put the Darkling on notice, it seems. She can feel it in the weight of their gazes, something like awe and perhaps fear.

Fear makes sense, Alina thinks. She lost her temper, *just a bit*, on that skiff. She likes to think her actions were justified.

She can only wonder how many hate her for what she’s done. It likely depends on the outcome of this very moment; will their enemies see them as weak and vulnerable now…or will they respect Ravka for finally doing something *just* for once.

Many of the First Army leaders are present, along with dignitaries from both sides. Scores of Grisha are in attendance, with an abundance of scarlet red *keftas* bright in the room, a warning against untoward violence. Alina is distinctly without a *kefta,* dressed normally.

Instead of feeling naked, this fact makes her feel at home.

She wonders if that appeals to the Fjerdans or if it makes them think she’s weak. Perhaps it makes her appear approachable. Perhaps even human, tangible.

King Dmitri looks down imperiously at their guests from his throne, the arrogance of his grandfather showing through. Too prideful, used to always having someone else fight his battles; namely Aleksander. Now, he’s made do with Alina.

She looks out at the gathered crowd, trying not to feel the way her heart leaps at the sight of Ivan’s tall, proud form at the head of the assorted sea of *Corporalki*. He’s looking at her like he wants to knock everyone out and be done with it, to take her away and make sure she’s alright. Alina feels that look in her soul, twisting and turning, feels it in her heart where his power briefly touches her.

As he examines her, Alina also runs her gaze over him. He seems unscathed, to the naked eye. Unharmed, aside from the exhaustion written on his face. Perhaps too many long nights at war with himself over what he did, over his betrayal of the Darkling.

Alina wonders if he's sat at Aleksander's bedside, the way she sensed him at hers.

Sometimes, she wonders if she dreamed of him, calling for her. Was it real? Or was it a figment of her imagination?

It couldn't have been real…he would have never begged her to not leave him…that's just… not possible.

It *can't* be possible, even if the look in his eyes makes the very air in her lungs burn.

There's so much she wants to ask him, as she gazes at him from across the room. She wants to know if he regrets what he did. She wonders if he regrets choosing her and she can only imagine that he thinks she made their lives worse by destroying the Fold.

Something in her chest hurts; her heart. She wonders if she's feeling him or if this emotional pain is all hers.

*Stop thinking about him,* she tells herself, tearing her gaze away from his strong, stony face. *Now is not the time to be weak. You can handle a bit more pain, for just a little longer.*

"Are we ready to begin?" Dmitri's voice booms out over the large chamber, his question pointed at the Fjerdan dignitaries. "Who will speak for you?"

Of the five finely dressed men gathered, the largest gentleman steps forward, eyes piercing and sharp, betraying a fierce personality under all his finery. His voice is gruff, accent thick. "We are. I will be speaking for Fjerda today."

The King gestures for them to approach the large table that has been placed before the throne. "Sit across from them," he tells Alina out of the corner of his mouth. Then, to the approaching men, he says louder, "My Sun Summoner will act as my mouthpiece."

Stepping up to the table, Alina feels the crawling sensation of hateful looking being directed at her. The Fjerdans have always loathed Grisha and if they hate Grisha, they hate Alina being considered a Saint *and* a Grisha.

The point man looks her up and down with a sneer curling his mouth as she gingerly sits in front of him. Alina keeps her face neutral, eyes blank. Waiting patiently.

"So. Speak, *mouthpiece* of the King of Ravka," he says crudely, eyes flashing with hostility.

Alina lifts her eyebrows only momentarily, acknowledging him. With a cool voice, she replies, "I thought I'd let you speak first. We're all aware of what has happened. I'm curious to know how you would like to move forward."

His mouth twists and he glances at the men beside him, as if trying to garner their thoughts on her evasive, non-confrontational position.

Seeing no guidance from his companions, he begins. “Your cursed dark magic wall is gone. Obliterated.” He says roughly. “What is stopping us from taken vengeance? You prevented our people from traveling, from trading with other nations, you held threat over us for years and years…”

He continues prattling on and Alina stares at him a little blankly, feeling a yawning emptiness grow inside of her. She imagines that this man likes to feel self-important; he likely enjoys the sound of his own voice, the way he pontificates.

When she’s had enough, she puts an end to it.

“I’ve heard your complaints. I acknowledge their existence.” Alina interrupts him calmly, with a soft voice. She runs her fingers over the wooden table between them. She looks at the fine wood grain for a moment before looking up to meet his sharp blue eyes. “I’ve not heard a single thought on resolution. Are you looking for threats or are you looking for solutions?”

The dignitary goes still, mouth hanging open. “Well…*uh*…no one comes *looking* for threats-”

“Then, why are you threatening Ravka? Or, was that not your intent?” Her expression doesn’t shift. It isn’t her job to display excessive emotion, not in this role. It could reflect poorly on the King.

King Dmitri drums his fingers on the armrest of his throne, staring at them with interest from behind Alina. She knows he’ll likely want her hanged if she lands them in another war, a fact she can nearly feel digging into her spine.

She cannot fail here. That seems to be a running theme in her life, actually.

The Fjerdan man clenches his jaw, nose flaring momentarily. He realizes she’s caught him, making him look like an aggressor in the eyes of everyone. “It wasn’t my intent.” He calls her a witch in his language under his breath.

Alina graciously ignores that. She’s been called worse.

“Good.” She smiles thinly at him. “I would hate to have to discuss *threats*. Don’t mistake that for weakness either; I am not without the capability of making your life hard. I simply don’t want to do it. I would prefer we discuss terms of peace. Or, as close to peace as we can agree to, as my King desires.”

The man sitting across from her works his jaw, as if chewing on his thoughts, working over how he wants to respond. “We are not opposed to…a cease-fire of aggression between our countries. But…”

“But what?” Alina can almost taste what he’s about to say next, anticipates it.

His face hardens with loathing, meeting her gaze directly. “Your kind is an abomination that we cannot stand for. How will you fix this problem? You are an affront to the Fjerdan people. *Hellspawn*.”

She bites her lower lip to keep from laughing at him. He sits in front of her and dares to call her hellspawn, as if that *means* something to her? What a child.

There come angry snarls from the gathered Grisha further down in the chamber, hearing these words, but King Dmitri lifts up a hand for silence, effectively stopping the angry buzzing.

Alina had assumed the subject of Grisha would still be a problem for the Fjerdans. Regardless…it's something that needs to be left alone. Tolerated.

"I thought this was a rather simple conversation, actually." Alina keeps her voice flat, showing no weakness or softness within her, even though her lungs still ache and her bones feels sore and heavy. "Ravka is a sovereign nation, as is Fjerda. If you wish that our Grisha not cross your borders, that's *fine*. We don't need your acceptance; tolerance is all we can hope for right now. But, within our borders you will follow our laws and will be beholden to our laws. There will be *no more* witch hunters behind our borders. If we catch *anyone*, they will be dealt with."

"And how will they be dealt with?"

"They'll be dealt with in a very permanent way, do you want me to spell it out further?" Alina's voice goes very sweet; she knows it disturbs the men across from her.

The man looks at his companions, as if expecting someone to speak up to her with him, but no one will meet his gaze.

"…and what of your Darkling? How can we trust that he won't create another Fold?"

Alina examines her fingernails, choosing her words carefully. "You see me here before you, instead of him. I think you understand what that means, don't you?" Her own words coil sickly in her belly, her thoughts racing over and over the same line: *what have you done to Aleksander, what have you done to him, Alina?*

The dignitary looks uncertain, so Alina helps him by saying, "It means *I am* in control here and I will protect you. I give you my word; I despised the first Fold, I will not tolerate another."

The men beside him nod in solemn acceptance of this.

"Do we understand each other, then?" Alina presses. "Will you accept the drawing up of terms that we can all agree upon?"

After a moment of glaring, the spokesman grits out, "Yes."

"Wonderful." Alina utters smoothly, internally relieved. She'd feared this would be a much worse affair, but it seems that age and experience is on her side. If she were a young girl, this would have been terrifying and she likely would have been uselessly emotional. "See? We can be friends, can't we?"

The man sneers at her disdainfully, saying, "We will never be friends, witch."

Alina sighs with irritation, feeling close to the end of her patience with his rudeness. “If you want to fight me further, I will treat you in the same manner as my widely feared predecessor. Do you want me to do that? Or do you like me better when I’m being kind?” The lights in the room flicker.

They all go silent.

“That’s what I thought,” she replies softly. “Most people like me when I’m being sweet.”

The King snorts from somewhere behind her, in a most unkingly fashion. Sensing that the conversation has come to a natural end, Dmitri gestures to the dignitaries and says, “We will draw up terms of peace and provide them to you in a few days’ time. You are welcome to my guest quarters. I expect this messy business to be finished soon enough.”

The men incline their heads with slight respect to the King, and most avoid looking at Alina whatsoever, the word witch burning on their tongues, unspoken. As everyone rises from the table, Alina tries not to notice the way that Ivan is still looking at her from across the very large room, the way he takes a step forward, as if aching to come to her side and grill her with questions.

As if he wants to run his hands over her and check her for harm. To press his mouth to hers, consume her from the inside out-

He knows better. He cannot approach this close to the King’s dais without explicit invitation. If Alina were feeling merciful, she would descend downward and go to Ivan, stand by his side, allow him to embrace her, the way she can feel he wants to. She can feel his small science crawling around inside of her, trying to be close despite the distance between them.

And yet, Alina is not feeling merciful at this time. Even though she feels drawn to him, as if being pulled by a string, she cannot make herself go to him. Exhaustion is eating away at her and the room begins to feel fuzzy.

Alina isn’t strong enough to face him right now, knows she’ll be swept away by his strength, drowned in the ocean of his power. That’s not…that’s not what she needs right now.

She turns to the King. “Is that all you need of me for now, *moi tsar*?” Alina asks as she leans close to whisper in his ear.

Dmitri nods, staring off into the assembled crowd of his subjects, all of them chatting and milling about now. “Consider the terms for me to provide. Draw them up and provide them to me by morning. We shall reconvene together and I will view your first draft. Otherwise, you may leave, Sun Summoner.”

Alina bows to him with respect and excuses herself, her hands shaking. All her energy was spent appearing in control in front of the Fjerdans, when really, under the surface of her skin, she feels as if a hurricane has torn through her.

Her power feels so utterly weakened, her body near useless.

As she turns to leave the room, she hears Ivan calling after her, but she can't face him right now, so she quickly flees.

She doesn't…know what to do with the aftermath of what's happened. She doesn't know how to cope with the fact that he chose her, that Aleksander is gravely injured, and that Ivan's been at her side instead.

She doesn't know what it all means, because being chosen feels bigger than life itself.

…and she doesn't have the energy or the heart for it yet.

There's too much responsibility attached to what it means for Ivan to be hers and Alina *isn't ready*.

~*~

Artfully slipping through a few back hallways and secret passages, Alina manages to slip just about everyone.

*Nearly.*

She hears the sound of running feet come around one of the corners, from the direction of the medical bay, then hears a familiar voice.

"*Moi soverenyi*-" Karyna starts out saying, "Wait up, please."

Alina's face scrunches up. Goodness gracious, the young Grisha aren't going to start calling her by that moniker now too, are they? *She will not have it*! Alina waves the word away as Karyna comes up beside her. "Do not start with that. Aleksander is still living, as far as I understand it."

A twinge of pain in her heart, at those callous words from her own lips.

"My apologies. It's just…you did a wonderful job in there. You were like *a Queen*." Karyna is babbling and seems to realize it, slowing her speech. She's looking at Alina with wide, awestruck eyes. "What can I do to help you? What do you need from me?"

Alina sighs. She supposes she should be prepared for this. Many of the Grisha will start wanting to position themselves in her good graces, now that she's unveiled herself as a powerhouse able to rival the Darkling, strong enough to keep him stuck in the sickbay.

"That's thoughtful of you. I do need something, actually, while I do my treaty work for the King. Please post two heartrenders at my suite. Let Edik and Illya take a break."

The healer pauses. "…why?"

How to explain this? Alina nearly groans, feeling more exhausted by the second, loathing that she'll soon need to start crafting an entire peace treaty with terms. By dawn. "Because, Ivan is going to be panting at my door and I need to be alone with my thoughts. I have…so many

choices to make, for my future. I also need to work on the treaty and craft Ravka's future. Edik and Illya are not equipped to deal with Ivan."

Making a wry face, Karyna says, "*Umm*…I don't think anyone is."

This is also very true. Alina makes a vague gesture. "Well, post four heartrenders. Six, if you must. They have my permission to knock him out if he chooses to get aggressive about it. I just don't want to hear that he's been abusing my sentries."

Karyna nods, looking a little pale. "I can do that. But…*um*…he's not going to be happy with me for it."

Of course he won't be happy. He'll be bloody livid. One doesn't need to be a genius to know this.

"That's not for you to worry about. The command comes from me and I outrank all of you," Alina replies with finality.

When they reach the front of her suite, Karyna steps forward a little awkwardly and suddenly throws her arms around Alina, hugging her tightly. Alina's eyes bug out in confusion as she pats the young woman's back tentatively. "*Ah*, what's all this?"

The healer squeezes her. "I'm so glad that you're alright. That you're alive. You deserve your freedom, more than anyone. When you destroyed the Fold, you were like an angel. I'll never forget it, for as long as I live."

The blatant display of emotion makes Alina feel a little off-balance, but she returns the embrace shortly. "I'm…glad I'm alive too. My freedom…and the end of the Fold…it's all I ever wanted." A strange emptiness washes over her and Alina steps away from the embrace, looking distant. The strange hole inside of her reminds Alina of old, depressing feelings.

Karyna frowns. "You have everything you wanted…what are you going to do next?"

That's the problem, isn't it? The gaping wasteland inside of Alina, an open wound. What is her purpose now, if not to destroy the Fold? She's done what she was meant to do. She accomplished what she intended. *She set herself free*.

What's left for her now? Does it even really matter that she lived? Maybe she should have died after all…

These thoughts are numbing and painful at the same time. Perhaps it's shock, eating away at her. Why does she feel this way, so empty and useless? It disturbs Alina. Is she truly without purpose?

Giving Karyna a weak smile, she says, "That's the problem, I suppose. I don't know. But I do know that I'm tired of this place. I'm so tired of these halls. I just…" she trails off. There are no words to speak. She inhales sharply and centers her mind again, saying, "Please, just get me some heartrender guards. I have work to do now."

The healer nods, looking at her with worry. "Are…you going to be alright?"

Stepping into her rooms, preparing to close the doors behind her, Alina says, “I’m not about to off myself.”

“That’s…not very reassuring.”

Alina shrugs; she doesn’t have the energy for this. She wants to sink into the earth and disappear, but she has important work to do. On top of that, she needs to examine her life going forward. She needs to plan. “Believe me or don’t. I simply don’t care right now.”

“…maybe I should get Ivan,” Karyna says suddenly, voice going a little high.

“Absolutely not.” Alina replies sharply. “That’s the opposite of what I asked you to do. He will not fix my current issues, Karyna. I *don’t need him* right now. *I will tell you when I do*. Do you understand me? When I want him, I will send for him and *not a moment sooner*.”

After a moment of pause, the young woman nods, looking a little anxious. Alina shuts the doors, sighing when she’s finally alone for the first time since she woke up in the medical bay.

Despite her harsh words, her mind drifts to Ivan, the scent of his skin, the sound of his voice. His touch on her skin, caressing her, gripping her hard. Possessively- even adoringly underneath all the aggression.

*Stop*, she tells herself, feeling the way her numb heart flips just once.

She knows it’s not fair to him, but she needs to be by herself for what comes next. With Ivan, her mind is never clear and she acts on emotion, rather than what’s *actually* good for her. The feel of him is like the push and pull of an ocean tide and Alina is always swept away.

Hell, she mostly enjoys being swept away…but…things have changed. She won her freedom, she ripped it right out of Aleksander’s hands and made herself *someone else*. Someone powerful, capable of choosing her own destiny.

How does passion and desire for someone from the darker part of her past fit into this new life? Someone who was very much a part of her pain and misery?

Alina wants to know if she will still choose him, after her mind is clear and her path chosen. She wants to know if she still chooses him, now that there’s nothing in this world holding her back, no *master* telling her she must have Ivan with her as her guard.

Will she be with him because she wants to, because she wants him with her as a companion?

She’s not stupid; she’s well aware that they weren’t healthy. They didn’t come from a healthy place; they weren’t emotionally healthy people whatsoever. They loathed each other, when they originally left the Little Palace together, all those years ago. Hell, she’d tried to make him kill her, because she knew he was the only one who hated her enough to do it.

Sometimes, she questions herself about their relationship in West Ravka. She questions if she imagined what she felt for him, if it was purely because he was simply there and she was

lonely, vulnerable. That she was weak, because he made her feel so good and kept her warm in the dark on the chilliest of nights.

Other times, she fears that what she felt was false, because of his small science.

She always told Fedyor that, about heartrending; *what you're making me feel* ***is a lie****.*

After all, how real can something be, if someone is twisting and turning your emotions and your body the way they want it to be? If they want you to feel comfortable with them, a heartrender can do it. If they want you to lust after them, they can make it so. They can twist and turn you into knots until you don't even know which way is up and which is *down*.

It's another reason she's always been uncomfortable with heartrenders. The idea that they can do *anything* to you.

What she wants to know at the end of it all is simply this; *without Ivan's influence, do I still want him as desperately as I did in West Ravka, when he was the only thing I wanted in this world, because he was all I had?*

It's a terrifying, emptying thought. A vast hole of despair and fear. She's afraid to look behind the curtain and see the truth.

She's afraid she loves him. She's afraid she *doesn't*. There is no outcome that doesn't leave her feeling out of control.

But…now is not the time for those concerns. The King expects a drafted treaty by dawn… and Alina will need to deliver. With an aching groan, she sits down at her desk and unrolls some parchment, preparing herself for a very long night.

---

---

The days pass in a whirl of crazed business and work. The dignitaries from Fjerda need more meetings, clarifications, changes to terms. It's been exhausting, the King summoning Alina from her chambers at all hours.

Indecent hours, even. Not that he cares; he's the King.

She's barely slept and it's souring her temperament. If Alina's lucky, she gets to cram in three consecutive hours of slumber, trying her best to not snap overly hard at King Dmitri or the dignitaries as they continue to meet.

Despite all of this, Alina's not seen the Darkling. She's heard he's *still mostly* bed-ridden. She's also heard that he needs a cane to walk, that he's winded easily, preferring to remain hidden from sight. Aleksander allows only a select few visitors- and Alina has a good guess as to who those people might be.

She assumes that she's excluded from that list. Saints, she can only image how furious he is with her.

It pains her, thinking of what she's done to him. It burns, like flame against her flesh, painful and searing. He pushed her too far…and look what she did to him. Briefly, Alina feels like a monster herself, finds herself arguing alone into the wee hours of the night about what she could have done differently. About how she could have spared him pain-

She finds no answers.

The fact that she won her freedom from him softens her towards him, only slightly. She feels pity and sorrow, because her goal was never to ruin him. *I need to see him. I need him to understand why it had to be this way. That he gave me no choice. I took the only choice I had.*

Aside from setting the record straight and clearing the air between them, Alina needs him to understand something else; she's **not** replacing him at the King's side. She has no desire to. In fact, over the past few nights alone, in a place full of terrible memories, she has come to the realization that she *will not be staying* here, in the Little Palace. She's free and it's time for her life to move forward. She doesn't want to live in the past, not the way he does.

So, when she has a moment of time not slaving over documents for Dmitri, she walks to the medical bay, feeling dread and anxiety in her heart. How will Aleksander react, when he sees her? Will he yell? Or will he be cold, an icy wrath in his gaze?

Will he call her a traitor? A faithless whore? The possibilities are endless.

His medical room is very far from where hers was, likely for *reasons*. Down the long halls she goes, until she finally approaches the one at the most far end, practically the other side of the palace itself. Before she even attempts to enter, she pauses outside the partially closed door, hearing familiar voices within.

"The border is still stable, then?" A rough cough and an ill-used voice.

"It is. She's done well with the dignitaries, even if they despise her." A pause. "The King has taken a liking to her."

A scoff, almost inaudible. "Why am I not surprised? Is there anyone she doesn't charm under her wing?"

"…the dignitaries…"

"It was a rhetorical question, Ivan. I didn't *need* an actual answer."

"As you say, Sir."

There's a heavy, unpleasant pause. Alina can almost envision something ugly passing across Aleksander's face, some unspoken emotion of displeasure. "As I say." Aleksander utters, parroting, his voice somehow rough and smooth. "You know, if you had done *as I said* on the skiff, we wouldn't *be* in this position. You turned your back on your duty to me, to Ravka-"

“I didn’t-”

“I watched you choose her, Ivan. *I was there*. Or, has that conveniently slipped your memory? I watched *your feelings* take precedence over our nation. Your weakness, on display for all to see.”

Ivan’s voice is strangely quiet. “I tried not to.” Alina imagines he’s hanging his head in defeat, in failure.

The Darkling’s voice is unmistakable, scolding, like a father to a disobedient son who has gravely disappointed him. “I gave you everything. *I made you* into the man you are today… and this is how you repay me? With another twist to the knife you so kindly placed in my back?”

Alina feels her insides shrivel, hearing those words. She knows what he’s saying; it isn’t just about the betrayal on the skiff- it’s also about Ivan being the other man in her bed.

She can only imagine how terrible Ivan feels, hearing those scathing words from the mouth of the man he’s admired for his *entire life.* Having his two toughest choices thrown in his face, as if he’s a criminal for making his own decisions.

“You did give me power. And status. You gave me more opportunity to succeed than anyone. But, you wanted to make me into your monster. If you were the Judge, I was the Executioner,” Ivan replies, his voice pained. Almost remorseful. “I never saw it, until…”

“Until what?” Aleksander sounds mocking, even with his voice so ruined and rough.

Another momentary silence, leaving Alina wishing she could see their expressions.

“It doesn’t matter. Fedyor was the only thing that kept me human, through all those years. And after him…” Ivan trails off, a little sharply.

Alina stands stock still outside in the hall, listening to the conversation she shouldn’t be listening to.

“Well, spit it out, man.” Aleksander rasps.

“…she saved me. *From myself*. From this dark, soulless path you wanted me to walk. She saved me even though I never made it easy for her.” Ivan’s voice is choked, rough, as if trying to bite back emotion. “I never even gave her reason to help me.”

Aleksander seems to sigh. His tone softens, “That’s her way, isn’t it? The kind heart that never quite *quits*. I suppose you’ve thrown your lot in behind her now completely, is that it? And all of my *Corporalki* will follow you. Well played.”

“I will always serve you, *moi soverenyi*. Your Grisha are still yours.”

“You cannot claim to serve me when you serve her. You made your choice very clear.”

“How is that fair?” Ivan snaps, tone suddenly rising, like a lash. “I chose you a thousand times, but the *one time* I choose what’s right for her, I’m suddenly unworthy in your eyes?”

The words are red hot, searing in their viciousness.

“When push comes to shove, I now know that *you will always choose her*.” Aleksander grits out with a very precise amount of anger, held barely in check. Alina is amazed, considering Ivan spoke in a completely disrespectful manner to him. It betrays just how weak the Darkling currently is. “You’ll choose her for as long as she allows you to warm her bed-”

“How dare you-” When a growl coils in Ivan’s throat, Alina figures she should probably vacate the premises in case they want to go at each other. This is not the time or place to step between them and set them in their respective places.

If they still want to fight over her like dogs over a bone, let them. She wants no part of it. In fact, let them beat the shit out of each other; they deserve each other after all these years, and if Aleksander is too weak to severely damage Ivan, all the better, her conscience is clear. Ivan is likely the strongest in the room, so she has no worries.

The shouts get louder and yes, it sounds like they are well and truly having it out over the fucking situation. And she means that literally.

*Sigh.*

As quietly as she can, Alina turns and walks away, praying that Ivan had been distracted enough to not notice that she’d been listening in on their private conversation, after she’d been avoiding him for all these days.

She needs to see Aleksander, *alone*, to speak about the future. What she’s decided. What she’s chosen.

She’s not ready to see Ivan.

*{…please, don’t leave me…}*

*{…Alina…}*

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** Okay, I promise the next chapter is the darn final part of this thing XD

Comments and kudos are loved ♥

# Final Chapter Part II

Chapter Notes

**AN:** HOLY EFF THE END IS HERE.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////

*We'd always go into it blindly*
*I needed to lose you to find me*
*This dancing was killing me softly*
*I needed to hate you to love me, yeah*
*To love, love yeah*
*I needed to lose you to love me*

*"Lose You to Love Me" – Andromida feat. Halflives*

////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////

Somehow, the days are beginning to move in a strange, timeless fashion. Moments, bleeding by, strange memories from years past popping into her mind. Aleksander had spoken of it, once. Of this phenomenon. He'd told her that until eternity truly stretched before her, and she accepted it, she could never understand.

Now, Alina thinks she understands.

She looks out the window, the ink dripping from her pen, and wonders if the moon chases the sun, or if the sun chases the moon.

~*~

One of her heartrender guards pokes his head inside of her room. "Olga is here to see you, *moi sover*-"

"Do not say it, young man." Alina replies, flipping to another sheet of parchment paper. "Send her in."

The boy flushes and steps backward, allowing Olga to step inside of Alina's suite, the doors shutting behind her. The middle-aged woman inclines her head respectfully, face severe, made more so by the lines of age written on her features. "I wanted to check in and see how you're doing. You've not been back to the medical ward for your checkups."

Oh. Alina had quite forgotten about those. “The King keeps me busy. You may check me over.”

The senior healer makes a few gestures with her hands, allowing her small science to pass over Alina, checking her vitals, blood pressure, and general well-being. The sensation is cold and detached, very professional. Very different from how Ivan feels, a fact that Alina keenly acknowledges to herself.

“You’re quite sleep deprived,” Olga utters disapprovingly. “You are still healing from all the power you exerted. You need rest.”

“Well. You tell that to the King,” Alina drawls, feeling when the healer’s small science bleeds away from her body. She shivers.

“Perhaps he doesn’t understand that you’re not sleeping.”

“If he understood, he certainly wouldn’t care.” Alina shifts to give Olga her full attention. “Besides, I catch a few hours, here and there.

The other woman frowns. “Are you having trouble staying asleep? Do you wake up hard of breathing? Dizzy? Heart racing?”

Sometimes. But, it’s more so that her mind is racing, endlessly.

“I just feel…restless.” It’s hard to describe. As if she’s a message in a bottle, lost at sea, tossing and turning in the icy cold spray. Or perhaps a child, watching the clock, waiting for the school bell to ring so she can run away and disappear for summer break. “I don’t feel like myself. It’s hard to sleep. Even when I find the time. It’s-”

“Stress.” The senior healer utters, mouth stern. “You’re stressed. You should consider seeing a hear-” Olga cuts herself off.

They both know what she was about to say. *A heartrender.*

*Yes, well. Not right this second, Olga.*

Wanting to change the conversation, Alina asks instead, “So, what’s up with my hair?” She touches the pale locks. “When will it turn back to normal?”

The healer looks uncomfortable, folding her arms behind her back. “I don’t think that it ever will. It’s a bit of a phenomena. I assume it’s from the power and the *merzost* that you used in excess. Perhaps even the fact that you drained much of your life force to destroy the Fold.”

Alina sighs in frustration. This isn’t…exactly what she wanted to hear. “Wonderful. I never imagined being a platinum blonde.”

She supposes it’s a new look, representing a new chapter in her life. Hell, a new book in her life, this is more than a damn chapter.

“If that’s all, mistress-”

“It’s not.” Alina chews over her next words carefully, not wanting to reveal too much, too soon. “It’s been some time since the three orders last held votes on who would lead each, am I correct?”

Olga’s eyes narrow in thought. “Yes. To my knowledge. At least the *Corporalki* order. The *Etheraelki* voted a few years back because their leader died in battle. Why do you ask?”

Alina twirls her pen, thoughtful. “Things will be changing soon. I wondered if…with new goals for Ravka…perhaps new leadership will be needed.”

“Aside from you?”

“I never said I would be leading anything,” Alina says carefully, meeting Olga’s serious gaze, watching the understanding come to her. The woman is smart, putting the pieces together, the conversation. The topic of the different orders.

“…is Ivan going to be stepping down?” Olga asks in a near whisper.

“I don’t know,” Alina replies casually, because she doesn’t exactly know how it will all shake out, once her plans become clear. She’s not even sure on what she wants, but she knows that someone intelligent needs to be aware of what might be coming. “But I know he will be more likely to retire if he feels he’s not skirting his duty. As long as a suitable predecessor can be put in place.”

Olga’s boots scuff on Alina’s floors as she comes to stand closer to her, standing by the bright window. “You’re going to leave…aren’t you? And if *you leave*, he’s-”

Alina shushes her. “I trust you can keep this all to yourself. Ivan may or may not stay. I don’t know my feelings on the matter right now either. He’s his own man and I am not his keeper. But I want you to consider throwing your name in the ring if…if the position vacates.” That’s a big ‘if’.

The other woman nods, ever serious and deep in thought. “I’m honored that you have thought of me for this.” She bows a bit, very shortly. “Though, I’ll tell you right now, if your intent is to…not be here…permanently…you won’t be leaving alone.”

Rubbing her forehead, Alina inhales hard. There’s so much she’s been thinking through. So many different outcomes. Every outcome is that she *leaves*. Sometimes, she’s alone. Sometimes, she’s *not*. “I haven’t determined if I’ll *allow* him to come with me.”

At this, the usually unsmiling woman nearly gives her something close to an amused look. “Good luck with that. I’d say he’s dead set on you. When are you going to stop tormenting him? He’s taking his frustrations out on all the trainees and now all of them fear him more than *Baba Yaga*.”

*Hm*. That sounds about right.

“When I’m good and ready to, Ogla. And not one moment before,” Alina replies.

She hasn't even had a chance to see Aleksander. There's no way she can even consider speaking to Ivan, not without discussing the lay of the land with…the Darkling.

Besides, Alina needs to know where she stands with Aleksander. After what she did to him, she wouldn't doubt that his hatred is burning quite strong.

*Great.* She thinks as Olga leaves her be. *Perhaps I'll become the new object of his 'desire for vengeance' for the next couple centuries.*

Splendid.

---

---

The King is a near constant companion and it's stifling. He's pleased with how Alina has handled the Fjerdans for him. *Very pleased*. In fact, it's become clear that he prefers working with her to working with Aleksander and for the life of her, Alina cannot figure out why.

Perhaps it's because she doesn't *pretend* to be nice to him. Perhaps in this small way, she and Dmitri are kindred spirits; they both loathe people being false to their faces.

This afternoon, he meets her in the Darkling's former chambers, expecting to discuss next steps now that the Fjerdans have been appeased. The dignitaries plan on leaving by dawn, so Alina's work is complete.

"This room…doesn't look like you…" the King says, eyeballing all the dark draperies and elegant pieces of ancient art. "I thought you would have had the royal designers in here already, fixing this dreary display. I am more than happy to send them here for you."

Alina rubs her forehead. She has a headache already. A lack of rest will do that to a lass. Dealing with royalty day in and day out will also. "Yes, well, I'm not redecorating."

"Well, why ever not?" He sounds incredulous, pale eyes confused. The King examines some statue piece with a look of distaste. "This thing is creepy and erotic all at once. *Saints,* it's rather odious. It must go, without question."

She huffs out a laugh. Aleksander would have a fit if she threw out his fine collection of treasures from ages past.

Her next words are ones that she's been pondering for many nights. Ever since she woke up from her strange, dark dreams. Her realization that staying here, trapped in this endless cycle of Kings and Queens and political drama are not in her interest.

These are things that Alina never cared about…and likely never will. Eighty years more won't change a damn thing. "I'm not staying here, *moi tsar*."

He looks horrified, head snapping in her direction quickly, eyes bugging out widely. "You're…*you're not?!* Pardon me, I don't think I heard you right." He pretends to clean out his ear. "Say that again, but *differently*."

Alina repeats her words in the exact same way, causing him to frown.

"That's not what I asked you to do," the King growls, red-faced. "I asked you to tell me that you're staying here. Try again, Sun Summoner."

Too bad. The idea of running a Kingdom holds no joy in Alina's heart. She wants to be free, to roam open fields, hike through deep forests, travel to the sea. Heck, she wants to go see her godchild, in a sleepy town in West Ravka. She wants to see her orphan children, to be a part of their lives as they continue to grow.

She doesn't want to be what Aleksander has been. She wants to be *someone else*. She wants to be herself, her true authentic self. She has sacrificed *enough* and she's damn tired.

"I can say it, but that would be a lie." Alina holds his stare, unafraid. She knew he wouldn't be pleased. "You have Aleksander-"

"I don't want Aleksander! I would have you executed for this outrage, if it weren't so damn counterproductive!" Dmitri snaps loudly, eyes flashing. The ever-petulant King, used to getting his way. "I want you to stay here. I want you to lead the Grisha for me. *Not him*."

She understands why he doesn't want Aleksander. She *gets* it. The Darkling has ruled from behind the scenes for so long, and likely with a hint of disdain and cruelty. Unfortunately, running this place is what Aleksander seems to enjoy.

…and Alina loathes it here. There are few pleasant memories that tether her in place.

"I'm afraid I have other things to do, *moi tsar*. It's your turn to truly rule this country. Can you do that?"

He looks utterly flummoxed. "But…what about the Grisha? The Darkling? Who will lead them in your absence?"

Alina has thought long and hard about this, knowing that she can't leave without leaving behind a solid power structure. A chain of command.

"The Grisha will re-cast their votes on who will lead their respective orders, with more responsibilities than before. Those leaders will report directly to you and the General jointly going forward. I'm no longer necessary. There is no Fold for me to destroy, as I'm sure you're aware." She smiles a bit at that, trying to soften the blow. "The Darkling will remain General, as he is good at protecting Ravka...even if his past methods are…harsh."

He still seems to be having trouble grasping the situation. He's annoying slow about it, actually. Dmitri paces the room, irritated, jaw clenched. He seems to be coming to terms with what she's said. Finally, he pauses by the window and his shoulders sag. The King exhales, as if exhausted of himself. "So…you're leaving. *Retiring*."

Alina runs her fingers across the splendid war table, briefly recalling all the times that Aleksander laid her bare upon it, his tongue between her thighs. “I am. No one can change my mind; this is my final choice.”

“…and the Darkling himself? He will agree to this?” he utters quietly, still not turning to look at her.

A certain chill falls across Alina and she closes her eyes briefly. “I will speak with Aleksander. You don’t need to worry about a thing, *moi tsar*.”

There’s the small matter that Aleksander might have no desire for her to leave. Then again, perhaps he’ll be eager to rid himself of her, now that he no longer controls her.

Perhaps now he’s the one who needs a few years to forgive her for tumbling him from his throne of Shadow & Vengeance.

---

---

The next time that Alina gains the courage to visit the Darkling, he’s once again, not alone. Not that Alina is aware of that, at first.

She quietly opens the door and steps into the shadowed room, the curtains pulled on all the windows. A single candle burns beside the canopy bed, casting much of the chamber in dancing shapes and flickering light. The shadows are deep, ominous.

There’s a shape in the bed and Alina is afraid of seeing the damage she has wrought upon Aleksander. She steps forward and gently shuts the door behind her, tasting tension in the air. Just as she’s about to make her way to his bedside, a voice stops her.

Baghra’s gruff, haggard voice snaps out from the shadows, unseen. “Here you are. Come to finish your botched job, have you? I’d wondered what you were waiting for. Spineless girl.”

“*What?*” Alina sounds mortified, nearly recoiling at the venom in Baghra’s tone. Is that…is that what they think of her? That she wants to murder Aleksander? She’d never…but that’s… not the point. “I’m here to speak with him, not you. There doesn’t need to be any threats involved-”

From the darkness, something shifts, coming around from the other side of the bed, like some sort of nightmare. The eyeless crone is staring in her direction, empty sockets for eye digging into Alina’s face as she slowly becomes more visible, even as shadow coils around her with evil intent. “You tried to kill him. *My son*. If you think for one moment that I will allow you to-”

Alina takes a step backward, feeling the weak coils of her own light growing inside of her defensively. “I didn’t try to kill him! I’m not a cold-blooded murderer!” Her voice doesn’t

sound strong, in the face of Baghra's verbal attack.

She can feel whispers of shadow at her back, harsh and cold, threatening.

The ancient woman sneers at her viciously, the old smell of her assaulting Alina's senses offensively. "Lies. You would like nothing more than to wipe him from this world for what he did to you. I get it, girl. But it is not your right; he is *my blood*-"

"Mother." The second voice in the room is raspy, worn and ragged. No longer easy and smooth, coming from the bed. "That's quite enough. Leave."

Baghra's monstrous head slightly turns to look towards the dark bed. "I will not. I refuse to leave you with her."

"You've been rooting for her to destroy the Fold all these years," Aleksander replies coldly. "Now, she's finally done it and you're mad because she almost offed me in the process. How did you think your plotting would go, Mother? There's always going to be bloodshed. *Leave me with Alina*."

Baghra pauses, empty sockets like gaping holes, boring into Alina's face, as if she can actually see her. She seems to be reluctantly weighing her options, hating what her own son has asked her to do. Wordless, the old Grisha slaps Alina sharply across the face with a loud crack. "Behave, girl." Despite her desire to end Aleksander's reign of terror, Beghra still carries a mothers love for her monstrous son.

Clutching her stinging face, Alina glowers hatefully after her elder, feeling the warm burn of blood rushing to her cheek. When the door finally closes behind her, silence falls over her and Aleksander, who she still cannot quite make out in the gloom of the room.

She doesn't like not knowing what he's feeling. Not being able to see him is both terrifying and relieving.

"May I open the curtains?" Alina asks politely, wanting to see his face in more clarity. Needing to see his eyes, to see his expressions. The darkness hides everything important and that cannot stand.

He grunts, irritable. "If you must."

She tries not to tremble.

Slowly, she opens them, allowing some light to fill the room, chasing away the shadows, revealing Aleksander propped up against a hoard of pillows in the bed. He looks worn and weary, eyes dark like bruises. His hair is mussed terribly, as if he doesn't quite care about his appearance the way he used to.

Perhaps he doesn't.

Regardless of his dishevelment, he's still striking, in his own way, commanding her gaze even in his weakened state.

“Why have you come?” He asks, sounding like he could use a sip of water. He also sounds very disdainful and unwelcoming.

Alina’s eyes dart around the room, seeking to bring a pitcher of water to his bedside. “We have things to discuss,” she starts out saying, her voice painfully nervous.

“Do we?” He’s really not making this easy, is he? He must be livid, underneath this icy demeanor. “What could we *possibly* have to discuss, Alina?”

Oh, now he’s just being difficult, making her chest hurt, tight and painful. He sounds bitter and destroyed, as if she’s the reason for all his dreams being ruined.

She is, actually. The reason for that…but she never thought about the fallout, the ramifications of that fact. Alina didn’t realize how terrible it was going to make her feel.

“Why it happened. How it happened. The truth of my intent.” Her voice is quiet, nearly a shadow itself in the room. She pauses by his bedside, running her eyes over his features. There are cuts healing on his face, but at least she didn’t maim him beyond a healer’s skill. “May…may I sit? By you?”

Those midnight eyes flicker over her before he looks away like a petulant boy. “I can’t stop you.” His voice is icy, unwelcoming.

Hesitantly, she sits down beside him on the bed, just on the edge. Close, but not *too* close. “I…I came to give you updates. On the Kingdom. And your Grisha.”

“How thoughtful of you,” he utters softly. “You forget that I hear much. There’s nothing you can tell me that I don’t already know.”

“Are you so sure?” she replies. “Maybe I’ve made decisions that your minions haven’t heard about.”

He goes still, strangely silent, his sharp mind toiling over her words.

Alina feels rather grim and terrible. “Never thought of that, did you?”

“Get on with it,” Aleksander grouses after a longer pause, voice like a razorblade. “Report from the beginning, regardless.”

He says ‘report’ out of habit, as if she’s one of his soldiers, instead of his longtime consort and bound Grisha. Alina doesn’t have the heart to tell him that she doesn’t report to him anymore; he likely knows. She doesn’t want to twist the knife in deeper.

There’s no need.

Exhaling, she tells him about the Fjerdan outcome, the peace she’s helped to put in place. “You won’t have to rule by fear anymore,” she tells him, trying to ease her words, somehow ease what she’s taken from him. “You can train your Grisha in peace. Like you always wanted.”

His eyes flicker. He senses what's behind her words now. Aleksander's body may be weakened, but his mind is as sharp as the kiss of a lash. "What about you, my lovely, cruel Sun Summoner? Don't you intend to be the Sun Queen, lording over us all?" He says the words with bitterness so acidic, that Alina is certain his tongue must be burning.

Alina swallows thickly. "*No*."

Her voice is very small, like a child's. She feels like a child right now, standing before an authority figure, about to confess some sort of wrong. Why does she feel this way? Where is her confidence going? What is it about him that makes her feel so utterly powerless?

Why, after all of these years, does his approval still matter in small ways?

"No?" He parrots dryly. "Why is that, pray tell? Do you prefer the term 'Empress' instead? Have I addressed you incorrectly?" The Darkling's voice grows scathing, anger beginning to slip through.

Wanting to stop him from continuing down this path of rage towards her, Alina swallows thickly, tries to ignore the pain in her heart. All the sorrow and remorse, things she would have felt as a young girl, fearing his rejection of her, *fearing that he didn't love her enough*.

"I intend to leave, Aleks." The words tumble from her lips, like falling stars in a darkened sky. "I don't intend to stay here. That's what I've come to tell you. I need you to understand-"

He stares at her in shock. No, no one would have known her plans, no one but the King, and Olga. "You have the whole court under your spell. Why would you give that up? All your power-"

She shakes her head sadly. Reaching out a hand to touch his, Alina feels the keen sting of refusal when he moves his hand away from her, denying her any emotional comfort. He wants her to stew in the pain she's caused them both.

Aleksander likes to think he's not at fault whatsoever, as usual.

"You forget. I never *wanted* power. I don't want to rule the court. I want to live a normal life." Her voice wavers. "It's all I ever wanted. *You know this*. Your place is leading the Grisha…it's not mine. I have no desire to take that from you."

The Darkling's face morphs into elegant cruelty. "Am I supposed to thank you for that? Do you want me to bow? And *how* low, Alina? Should I press my forehead to the ground at your feet. I am loathe to admit, my joints are rather achy, after the damage you've done to me, so groveling *might be difficult*."

Gritting her teeth, because now he's going a little too far with his own self-pity. He's wallowing in it. Just before she snaps something unkind at him, she realizes that she looking into the mirror of herself, in this very moment.

How many decades was she verbally cruel to him, full of bitterness and self-pity? How many years did she wallow in the darkness of hate?

Containing her initial anger, Alina forces herself to remain calm. “I’d never ask that of you, Aleksander. I only wanted to tell you…that your place is still *yours*. But you need to be just, this time. No more Folds. No more lording your power over others. You’re wise; I know you can be a fair leader. I know you have it in you, Aleks.”

Those midnight eyes return to her face, assessing her. Searching for falsehood. After a moment, his nose flares slightly as he inhales. “You truly mean what you say. You mean to leave me. *Again*.”

Pain flares inside of her, like needle under her skin. “You don’t need to say it that way.”

“I don’t? Why is that?” Anger rushes forth again into his tone, like wave. “All of our years together and still you want to throw it all away. We were made for each other and still you refuse me, even after you’ve beaten me down. I’ve even heard that you’ve spurned Ivan, after what he did for you.” The shadows coil like smoke around the bed. “You are a cruel, cruel woman.”

“Don’t talk about him,” Alina snaps suddenly, unable to keep her tone even. “Not like that.”

“I will talk about him in any way I wish. I made him into the man he is. He’s nothing without me.” His gaze is knowing, hostile. *Jealous*. “I suppose you intend to take him with you?”

As always, there is no hiding anything from the Darkling. His mind is simply too calculating.

“I never said anything about that,” Alina replies, unable to meet his gaze for long. “As you said, I’ve not seen him.”

The laugh that crawls out of Aleksander’s chest is a horrid, wounded thing. “Don’t lie to me, just because you’re lying to yourself. How dare you assume I will let him leave the service? His vows are to *me*. To Ravka and the Grisha of this Palace.”

Alina’s stomach roils, turning over at his words. Accidently, she bites her tongue, tastes copper in her mouth. She swallows it, fighting back a rush of emotion trying to claw out of her. “Will you not give him a choice? Will you risk his resentment?”

In a fit of irritation, Aleksander makes as if he plans to sit up and pace the room, but he grunts in pain and sinks back into his pillows, breathing hard. At the other side of his bed rests an ornate walking cane, obsidian, with a wolf for a head.

So, it’s true. He is so incapacitated that he can barely get around with help. Alina feels even worse, feels like a monster for reducing him to this state.

She can see how it shames him, to be seen this way by her, so she averts her gaze momentarily.

With effort, he seems to let his frustration seep away, before speaking again. “I already have Ivan’s resentment. And, he has the distinct luxury of knowing *mine*.” Aleksander’s voice returns to being cool as silk on a snowy day. “I’m not sure that will ever change.”

At this, Alina feels a grin tug at her mouth, cutting through her unpleasant emotions. “Maybe a few years apart will do you good, *hmm*? Should fix that right up.”

Aleksander pauses and gives her an indecipherable look, as if trying to figure out what exactly she’s found so amusing. Then, he looks away and snorts, the corner of his mouth twitching. “I’m not sure it worked so well with you, if you recall.”

“Yes, well. Choice and personal freedom does help, you know. A lack of choice and freedom has the opposite effect.”

Silence falls between them, painful and yawning. Sudden realization, dawning on him, acceptance or anger, warring inside of the Darkling’s heart.

His voice is soft, almost remorseful. “…you’re really leaving me. Leaving all of this behind.”

It makes her suddenly feel like dying inside. The lonely little boy expression on his face, his voice, those liquid dark eyes. It’s killing her and it’s hard to hold onto hate, to remember how he wronged her. He was always so broken, so twisted inside, a misguided boy in the body of a man-

Finally, something in her breaks, a bit. More than a bit. She’s tired of being so strong, these past few days. Being the face of *everyone*. She tired of holding this nation on her shoulders. Face twisting with painful emotion, Alina leans down to rest her forehead on his shoulder, voice wavering with a sob when she says, “Aleks. I’m so s-sorry. I didn’t mean to…I didn’t mean to harm you so terribly…I just wanted it all to s-stop.”

For a terrible moment, he doesn’t say a word nor does he touch her. Alina fears that he’s disgusted by her, hates her, doesn’t understand what she’s trying to say-

The Darkling finally lifts a shaking hand and caresses her hair gently. Soothingly. He sighs, as if trying to let go of his own anger, just for her sake. He’s never enjoyed seeing her sad. “I know, love. *I know*.” He pulls her closer and the familiar scent of sandalwood fills her nose, nearly comforting. This simple reminder of what they could have been vs. what they are is painful and her chest shakes with another painful whimper. “*Shhh*. None of that. It’s done, Alina. I pushed…and you acted. I’m almost impressed by how you bested me. After all this time. You won.”

Why can’t he just understand? *It’s not about winning.*

“I just. I wanted you to know that I don’t want you dead. It wasn’t my intent.” Alina gathers herself together, trying to contain the emotional part of herself. It’s hard. It feels like her insides are leaking out. Years of rage, humiliation, depression, bitterness, hate, self-loathing…it’s all bleeding out, being replaced by *something else*. Something that tastes like forgiveness. “I wanted you to know, before I leave, that what I told you in your tent that night, before all of this…it was true. I would have loved you, *still*, if not for all of this horror.”

Graciously, he allows her to sniffle on him. He strokes her hair, whispering with his lips against the crown of her head, “My sweet Alina. No one has a heart *quite* like yours. You’re

making it sound like you expect us to never cross paths again."

It's possible that she's being a little dramatic. A little overemotional. Now, she feels stupid. "I've not had any sleep," she chokes out, pulling away a bit. Alina wipes some tears off his shoulder. "I've been crying on you like a stupid child."

"I don't mind."

The kindly tone he takes on makes another sob rack her lungs. If only he had been like this from the beginning, the way he was before he collared her, enslaved her, all those years ago-

"*Shush*. It's your turn to listen to me. Are you listening, Alina? I *have* time," he breathes, brushing a finger over her lips. "And so do you. In a few decades, this will all be a bad memory…and you might feel differently by then. You will feel better. *This time will be different*."

"H-how do you know?"

His eyes flicker, so dark that she could fall into them and never return to the light. "Because, you told me it would be different. This is your choice and you won your freedom."

Naturally, he's right. She did know it would be different this time, because she can choose to never return. She's beholden to no one. Alina laughs bitterly, wiping at her eyes. "What's that saying? The one about loving someone?"

He gives her a slow, unhappy smile. "If you love someone, you'll let them go."

"Are you truly letting me go? If in thirty years, I want to come back to the Little Palace, you won't say no?"

Staring deep into her eyes, straight into her soul, he doesn't answer. He doesn't speak the words aloud. He doesn't need to. They both *know*.

She swallows thickly. Of course, Aleksander will always welcome her back.

But-

"…and Ivan?" she whispers the words, almost afraid to say them aloud. She fears the answer. Her eyes must reveal what's in the other part of her heart, because the Darkling looks away from her, his jawline clenching briefly.

The air goes tense, crackling with some form of vicious awareness between them. The shadows darken, only momentarily.

Aleksander grimaces and then sighs. "Take him." He utters, something ugly shaping his lips. "I want him out of my sight for a few years. He's chosen you anyway."

Alina covers her face briefly, fighting down terrible emotions, feeling overwhelmed. "And… what if he doesn't want to come with me, Aleksander? He's a soldier; he prefers your way of living. What if he wants to stay serving you to make up for what he did-"

“I highly doubt he’d even entertain staying if he knew you were *leaving*.” Aleksander scoffs, disgusted. “I dare say he wouldn’t even know what to do with himself, with you gone. If you leave, you better damn well take his unfaithful ass with you. The pair of you *deserve each other*.”

The last bit isn’t meant to sound positive…and it doesn’t.

---

---

“What are we doing?” Karyna whispers from beside Alina the next day.

With a startled squeak, Alina looks to her right and sees that the healer has snuck up beside her, where she’s looking around a large bush. “We aren’t doing anything,” Alina whispers loudly. “I’m just taking the air.”

“*Uh huh*.” Karyna raises an eyebrow. “You’re killing me with your sad yearning eyes. Just go talk to him.”

Ivan is growling at a group of young Grisha, his voice carrying over the distance, doing things to Alina that she doesn’t like to admit to or acknowledge. “I am not yearning whatsoever,” she mutters. “I just happened to be here, in this bush. And he happened to be over there. Barking orders. *Very* effectively.”

The young healer leans against her, nudging her side. “Your heart gives you away silly. Why are you torturing yourself? And him? What is this ‘self-restraint’ accomplishing?”

Self-restraint. *Hah.* That’s one way of putting it.

“I’m afraid that it’s not real. What I feel for him. What he feels for me. That’s it’s just… chemicals in my body. Firing neurons. He’s the most powerful heartrender here and I…I’m weak to what he can do.”

The healer gives her an indecipherable look. “You’ve not been with him in days*, weeks nearly*. Hell, you kept him at bay even when we were at the border. And yet, here you are, watching him from afar, with that absurd pining expression on your face. I hate to break it to you, but that’s what love is; chemicals in your body. Nothing more.”

That word again. Alina doesn’t like hearing it; she doesn’t like the finality of it, nor the depth of its meaning.

Alina groans, tilting her head backwards briefly. “There’s definitely more to it than that. You don’t understand…what we were like. Decades ago. It was…it was bad. *We were terrible people*. To each other.”

They pause to watch him cross his arms over his chest, scowling down, unimpressed with some trainee’s form. He corrects them with short, harsh efficiency, before demonstrating how

it should be done. Alina still loves watching his hands.

“Is he still terrible to you now?”

“…no. He’s a bit arrogant, he’s a pig, quite overbearing, and he’s stubborn. But he’s not cruel; he pays attention, a little too closely, makes sure I’m well taken care of. He’s more like an angry rooster, actually, guarding a hen house.”

Karyna snorts at the comparison. “Do you think he’d be cruel to you in a year?”

“No.”

“In another year?”

“*No*- what the hell are you getting at?”

“I don’t know, it just seems to me that you’re both different than who you were years ago. Maybe you shouldn’t be so hard on yourself? Can you truly say he’s the same man he was? Would he have disobeyed a direct order from the Darkling in favor of helping you back then?”

*No, he wouldn’t have.* Alina recalls the fight she overhead the other day. *And now, it seems like Ivan isn’t backing down over anything with him.*

Her gaze is drawn back to where Ivan is scowling down very intimidatingly at the trainees. His eyes are fierce and his shoulders are set proudly as he gives sharp corrections. She misses the sound of his voice, the way he looks down at her when she’s in bed and he’s standing in the doorway, leaning in that predator fashion of his, eyes half-mast…

Karyna’s eyebrows rise up and she bites back a silly grin as she watches Alina. “You might as well go over there. I mean…he’s not very distracted. I’m pretty sure he’s well aware that you’re watching him. He’s showing off how bossy and important he is.”

…the way his small science feels in her veins, what it feels like to belong to someone in the way that she wants to belong- wait, what did Karyna say?

*Horrid, horrid man!* Alina flushes. “Are you telling me he’s been aware of me this whole time? And he hasn’t…he hasn’t tried to approach me? He hasn’t come over to yell and demand to know why I’ve been avoiding him?”

That seems…absurd! Usually, if she avoids him, he chases hard until he corners her. This doesn’t make any bloody sense-

Karyna shrugs. “I guess that means he, *ah*, got the message about you needing space from him? He’s respecting you, isn’t he?”

That…almost seems unbelievable.

Alina frowns in concern, looking back at her…bed companion…of the recent decade.

Is there something wrong with him? Or worse, is there something wrong with *her*? Does he not want her anymore-

"Oh, Saints, whatever you're thinking right now, it's *not* that," Karyna mutters. "Stop stressing and go over to him! He wants you to! I promise."

For a moment there, Alina almost does. She steps forward, just once, thinking she'll just go up to him, it will be just like it used to be, he'll hug her close, tell her that he's missed her, that he's sorry for all those dark, awful years-

"I can't!" Alina groans miserably, spinning on her heel, storming back into the Palace, not seeing the way Ivan turns his head to watch her leave.

---

---

Early in the evening, while everyone is at dinner, she goes to Fedyor's gravestone and slumps on the ground, pressing her forehead against the cool stone.

Her insides are spinning. She feels like she's being torn in two very different directions.

"I don't know what to do."

There's no answer, but she never expected one, so she continues.

"I know what I want. I just don't know if what I want is the *right* thing."

Digging her fingertips into her aching eyes, Alina whispers, "I wish you were still here. I miss your laugh. I miss the way you always made me feel better. I miss the way you never judged me. I miss the way you loved Ivan, and how you could always smile about it, because you were the only one who got to see the best side of him." She swallows thickly. "I remember how you always wished I could see him the way you did."

…and now, here she is. Destroyed from the inside out, shaming herself for what she feels, terrified that she's immoral, wrong, and vile-

Her voice cracks as she runs her fingers over Fedyor's name, engraved forever into stone. "Is it so wrong that I want him?"

The night owl hooting is her only answer.

---

---

She agonizes over it extensively, until she finally gives in to herself.

Does love, she argues internally, always need to be the answer? Why can't it just be something simple, something like want and desire and hard-won respect? What about happiness? What about mutual understanding, and caring?

…and if it's love, does love even need to understand the word 'morality'? And perhaps, a lack thereof?

Does she even need to care, at her age? Alina's no child. She's not naïve anymore. She's got both eyes open.

She's had her eyes wide open with Ivan for a very long time. That's more than she can say for her origins with Aleksander, who portrayed himself as someone he wasn't, just to draw her in.

Ivan…Ivan never pretended a damn thing.

Getting up, her robe whipping around her bare legs, Alina flings open her double doors, revealing all four of her heartrenders standing vigil. One young gentleman in scarlet asks cordially, "Yes, mistress?"

Good grief, they're calling her what now? Nevermind. *Nevermind.*

"Send for Ivan," she commands as calmly as she can, her decision made. They stare at her, blinking in surprise. She knows what they're thinking; Alina told them to bar him from her doors for days upon days, now she wants him? Oh, the confusion! The drama! The sheer absurdity from an old, difficult-to-please woman!

When they don't move for a good moment, Alina sighs and rubs her forehead in exasperation. "You're giving me a migraine, boys. Do you not understand what I just asked of you?"

One of them salutes quickly. "Yes, *Sankta*. But, are you sure-"

*UGH*. "Do not call me that odious word." She exhales hard. "Of course, I'm sure. I wouldn't have asked you otherwise, child. Now, go get him. Once he arrives, you are all dismissed."

One of the others gives her a wary look, "Our orders are to guard you…"

Very, very dryly, drier than a desert, Alina asks, "Is there something you can do for me that he cannot?"

The young man stutters a bit, trying to think of a suitable answer. How charming.

"The answer you are looking for is *no*, dear boy. Do you really think the head of your order isn't fully capable of protecting me?" Alina rolls her eyes, giving them a sly smile. "Besides, I promise you; you don't want to be outside this door once he gets here."

A few of them go red, instantly, realizing what she means. "I'll get him right away, *Sankta*-"

“What did I just tell you about that word?”

He bows, bright red, stuttering out, “S-sorry!! I’m sorry!” The young heartrender scurries away to do her bidding.

Alina scoffs. *Good grief.*

Leaving this place behind cannot come soon enough.

~*~

Predictably, Alina doesn’t have to wait very long for her guest to arrive. She’s sitting on her bed, reading, when the doors to her suite finally open softly, revealing a very familiar figure.

Tall and intimidating, Ivan steps into her chambers and slowly closes the doors behind him, his dark eyes on her shape.

The silence is heavy, aside from the sound of Alina’s guards leaving, their boots sounding down the hall.

She wonders if Ivan can hear how loud her heart is pounding. She wonders if he can feel it in her throat-

“You called for me?” He sounds neutral, as if unsure of how to act near her.

Perhaps Alina feels the same. So much has changed. So much *hasn’t.*

He stands stock still, the perfect soldier with his arms behind his back, chest thrust forward. Simply watching her. Waiting for her to tell him what to do.

“I did,” she replies just as evenly. “Thank you for…arriving so promptly.” What the fuck is she saying? Can she be any more awkward? *Ugh.*

His jaw works slightly, a sign of a darker emotion just under his skin. “Is this how it’s going to be from now on? You just summon me when the urge strikes? Am I here to scratch an itch?”

Ivan’s never been good at holding in his harsh emotions for long and it seems that being neutral is fast evading him. At least he’s not calling her ‘Starkov’ yet.

Alina tries to embrace the way his words sting. She deserves his confusion. His anger. She’s been hard on him; she’s been cruel on purpose.

Sitting crossed-legged on her sheets with a serenity that she doesn’t feel, lifting her chin, she says, “Is that really what you think, Ivan?”

Ivan swallows, hearing his name on her lips. He looks away briefly, his profile sharp and stony as he keeps his true feelings hidden. “I don’t know what to think with you anymore.”

Alina exhales and reminds herself that she's hurt him. He's hurt her, she's hurt him, but at some point, the circle must end.

"Come to me," she whispers, a simple statement.

She's not asking, she's not commanding; he can choose to leave if he wants to. The choice is his.

His hands clench into fists and she sees the way his shoulders go tense. Those eyes of his, flashing with darkness. Anger and hurt at war. "Why should I? I'm not your dog, *I still have my pride*. Even if you've tried your best to humiliate me, to make me bend backwards for you these past few weeks. I'm not going to crawl back to your feet, waiting for any scraps you want to give-"

"I asked you here tonight, because you are the only person in this Palace that I want to be with," she says, pleased that her voice doesn't crack with the terribly fraught emotions running inside of her. His words *hurt*. Her voice is high and tight with pain. "Don't you see? Don't you understand how I…could you please just…look inside of me with your heartrending-"

"I don't want to," he snaps caustically. "It's like a big tease. Being able to touch you without having you. Knowing you don't want me; you only want what I can do for you."

That crashes down on her the like the cruel, cold weight of the true sea. For a moment, her lungs are frozen and she can't breathe, just staring at him in horror, because how did this go so wrong, so fast, why can't she fix this?

Unable to stop herself, Alina covers her face, as if that can hide the sob that tears out of her throat, agonized. "Just go then," she cries, overwhelmed. "I won't keep you."

Another sob wracks her body, and she's so absorbed in it that she stops paying attention to him, doesn't realize that his footsteps are coming closer; not leaving.

"Don't cry," he says, voice sounding softer, less angry. "Alina-"

"I did what I had to do," she says sadly. "I needed to destroy the Fold and you- you were a distraction! I couldn't focus with you near. I couldn't complete the one duty that I had in my life, the one task only I could complete. Can't you understand? And, not just that…but our history! I kept thinking there was *something wrong with me*, because how could I love someone who helped keep me captive-" She sniffles into her own shoulder, no longer wanting to speak.

Exhaling hard, Alina wipes at her eyes, pushes her feelings into the pit of her belly and looks at him again, gathering her courage to see his expression.

Ivan is sitting on the edge of her bed, looking down at her, eyes dark and unreadable. A part of him looks ashamed, remorseful. Another part of him is that flat, cruel wasteland, attempting to validate the things he's done in the name of duty and honor.

Finally, he swallows and one of his hands twists roughly in her sheets.

“I wanted to see you,” he rasps coldly. “Even back at the border, with the skiff, and you wouldn’t-” Ivan cuts himself off, looking pained, suddenly. Remembering how she treated him, likely. “I’ve been *waiting*.”

“I know,” she whispers, feeling her insides twisting up into painful bits.

His jaw shifts again, his throat working visibly, a sign of him swallowing emotions. Not wanting her to see them. “…you kept me away. You wouldn’t talk to me. I don’t know how you feel anymore. I don’t know what you want from me.”

*Is there someone else? Do you not feel anything for me now?* These words hover like smoke in the air, unspoken by him, and yet felt vibrating in Alina’s bones. She knows his tells, his nonverbal cues.

“When we returned after the destruction of the Fold…I didn’t even know myself anymore. I didn’t know what I wanted.” It feels like a razorblade, tearing out of her mouth, cutting her tongue. “It didn’t feel right for me to allow us to continue until I…until I knew. I needed to choose, Ivan. I needed to choose and you have no idea how terribly I feel the weight of what you sacrificed on that skiff.”

He flinches. They are both aware that duty and loyalty mean more than life for him. And he gave all of that up for her. To protect her from Aleksander.

“I don’t feel deserving, sometimes.” She laughs bitterly. “It sounds irrational, I know. That I, the Sun Summoner, feel unworthy of such commitment. Such dedication. But I do. I feel *unworthy.*”

Silence falls between them. Then:

“You’re such a foolish waif,” he utters, staring into her eyes seriously. When he reaches out and cups her chin gently, Alina thinks she’s going to die of happiness. Ivan’s voice is rough with emotion. “How can you even think like that? I’m the one who wronged you, more than I ever did you any good. I should be the one who doesn’t feel deserving. I should be the one to walk away and let you live your precious, righteous life in the light.” He groans, eyes now on her mouth. “But you’re the only thing I want…and I’m not a good man; I’m far too selfish to give you up.”

When he finally leans down to taste her lips, the world burns away in a blaze of relief and sheer elation. Alina’s small hands are at his shoulders as she desperately tries to get close to him, wanting the pain and the hard feelings to go away. He holds her close as his mouth moves over hers, his body saying all the things that his mouth won’t.

She just wants them to be fine again. The way they were in West Ravka.

For a few euphoric moments, they press against each other, lips eager and needy, hands roaming with a certain greed. Alina can already feel the familiar shape of his manhood, hard

and aching against her body, a small wet stain already forming on his trousers, proof of his enthusiasm.

When they briefly pull back for air, he starts pulling at her simple robe and-

Alina's vision blurs a little, a reminder of her sheer exhaustion. Even if her mind wants to give herself to him, her body feels tired and weak under the force of his passion.

"Ivan. *Ivan*. Please, slow down for a second. *I'm exhausted*," she tells him, before he gets ahead of himself. "Can…can we first…I haven't slept properly in days-"

He's practically shaking with need, but he pauses, looking at her with worry. "What? Why haven't you been sleeping? What use were all those boys outside your room?"

Ivan sounds irritated suddenly, but Alina realizes the reason, which makes her laugh weakly. "My mind has been constantly racing, since working for the King. And, I didn't want 'those boys' heartrending me. I just…I'm picky. You *know*." He grunts, because he does know, but he seems somewhat soothed that she wasn't using her guards for relief. She kisses his forehead fondly. "Heartrend me, Ivan? Please."

His mouth pauses on her neck and she can sense his feelings of rejection. "Oh," he sounds a little embarrassed. "I thought-" He sits up, as if to back away from her, but Alina grabs his wrist to keep him close.

"Please, just hold me. I need to sleep and it's been a very long time since I had a full night of rest. I need your help." *I only want your help, no one else's.*

Carefully, he situates his hips away from her, as if trying to cool himself down, even as his arms go around her. Alina sighs into the comforting warmth of his body, the familiar feel of him holding her, sound and safe.

How could she have ever imagined she didn't truly love this?

"Are you ready?" His voice is thick, arousal still coursing through him, even as he tries to crush it down.

Alina nods against his chest, nuzzling into him. Within moments, she feels the sensation of his small science inside of her, traveling through her veins, slowing her heartrate down, easing her into an easy, soundless slumber, into the deep silence of the ocean of his power.

All consuming, right where she belongs.

It's heavenly, and she sinks into darkness, feeling safer than she's ever felt in a long time.

~*~

She wakes later and she's still in Ivan's arms, feeling him breathing steadily beside her. Shifting against him, feeling too warm, Alina asks sleepily, "Is it dawn?"

"Almost," his voice is thick with sleep. "Do you want me to help you sleep more-"

“No.” She doesn’t. She really, really doesn’t feel like sleeping now. She must have gotten a very good handful of hours sleeping, because she feels more alive than she’s felt in weeks. Right now, the only thing she wants is to feel him against her.

“Is it just me, or is it hot in here?” Alina asks, because she’s burning with *something*. It's funny, has she been sleeping alone for so long now that she's already forgotten what a darn blazing oven he can be? He's her favorite way to stay warm on a cold night. Under her skin, she feels desire coil, like a snake awakening, wants to get her nails into him, wants to feel him deep in her bones. She’s deprived herself of this long enough, hasn’t she? Alina struggles with her robe, squirming out of it, revealing her naked flesh to his gaze.

Ivan swallows thickly, watching her. After about a moment, he pulls her back to his body and pins her underneath him. Alina arches against him, pleased at his reaction, even as he doesn’t make any effort to disrobe himself.

What’s he waiting for, isn’t this an open invitation? Does she need to spell it out in slow motion? Or-

“Please, Alina. I’ve been waiting for you for a long time,” He rasps, rubbing his clothed sex against her, hard and aching. “I need to know you still want me.”

The words stun her as she stares up at him; he’s afraid she no longer desires him? Her thighs spread slightly, making more room for him, welcoming his attention.

“Of course I want you,” she replies, running her hands over his clothed shoulders, wanting to strip him of his clothes, needing to feel his skin against hers.

She wants to feel his strength, the way he makes her feel so helpless under him-

“I’ve missed you so much,” he groans, hips moving against her, pressing. “Let me show you. I want to show you.”

If he were any other man, she’d think he was *begging* her.

“So, show me,” she says in a throaty voice that she almost doesn’t recognize as her own.

He groans, sitting back momentarily, just to get rid of his clothes. Within seconds, he’s back on her again, lips tasting her skin, hips meeting and dancing together like ocean waves.

“Tell me when,” he says, his sex slipping through her wet folds.

The thick head of his manhood spreads her lower lips a few times as he presses, letting his precum mix with her own excitement. Her thighs feel soaked with the mix of their arousal, proof of their need for each other.

On accident, as they writhe against each other, the tip of his cock pops inside of her and he groans in delight, even as Alina winces slightly.

It’s been sometime and the stretch is *mightily* uncomfortable, so Alina shifts her hips away from him and drags his hand down to replace his cock. “Make me ready for you,” she tells

him. “Help me?”

His chest rumbles with need at her words, his fingers delving inside of her to gently stretch her walls, preparing her for him. “Sorry,” he tells her with a smirk, chest rumbling with male pride. “I forget how delicate you are. How tight.”

“You aren’t senile, you haven’t forgotten anything,” she quips. “I think you just like hearing that you’re well-endowed.” She gasps as he delves into her deeper with his fingers, pressing against all her favorite places.

He likes to watch her squirm, likes watching her come undone underneath him. He likes when she begs for him to finally fill her with his cock.

When he finally pushes home inside of her, he doesn’t thrust, he simply eases his way all the way inside, letting her feel every inch. His body is shaking with need, with restraint, trying to be good for her. They both sigh at the feeling of being intimate together again, being connected this way.

They don’t move, they simply breathe each other in, allowing Alina to feel the way he throbs inside of her, his cock kicking with his heartbeat.

“I thought you were replacing me,” he says hoarsely, after a moment, lips kissing her cheekbones, nose nuzzling hers.

Alina can barely think aside from the feeling of him flexing inside of her. “Replace you with who?” She gasps weakly; he feels so good inside of her and he’s not even thrusting. She grinds against his pubic bone, trying to relieve herself somehow, but he stops her, holding her still.

He plays with her swollen clitoral hood, tugging in a way that makes her keen for him. “Anyone. Anyone who supported you better than I did.” He sounds ashamed.

“No one can ever replace you,” she tells him, pressing her hand over his heart. “Don’t you ever forget that. I chose you a long time ago…but I was afraid of my own choice.”

“Are you still afraid?”

She kisses him hard, teeth knocking together.

He understands her answer, groaning with want.

Effortlessly, he rolls her onto her back, no longer on their sides. He grinds down into her, his thick cock filling her in ways that have her crying out his name, her nails digging deep grooves into his back, so close to the edge of orgasm-

“Oh, *Alina*…” he moans, hips going still, one of his hands still holding the headboard as he arches up over her, hips pressing her into the mattress.

She feels him dump his first load inside of her and the fire within Alina burns hotter, feeling his eagerness for her. He moans as his cock pulses again and again, his hips grinding into her.

After a moment, he flushes and looks what might pass for sheepish on another man. He didn't remember to pull her over the edge in his excitement, something very unusual for him. "Sorry, I-"

Alina rolls her eyes, because she knows he's still hard as rock and there's nothing to be sorry about aside from the mess she knows she's going to be by the end of this morning.

He shifts and rolls them onto their sides again, lifts her leg over his hip and moves within her, deep and strong, and she's been aching to be with him so much that it doesn't need to be fast or hard to bring her closer to the edge. It feels perfect; close, quiet, and intimate.

The sounds of their coupling fill the room with soft sighs, kissing, and loud moans. He brings her over the edge of eternity time and time again, unwilling to part with her body, his heart synced with hers. No one disturbs them, having read into Alina's orders that no one was needed at the doors while he's with her.

When they're finally sated, Alina feels like she needs to change the sheets herself; she would be mortified for the servants to see the mess they've made of this bed.

Looking down at her body, she gives him a look. "Could we…*ah*…wash? Or were you intending to parade me around like this so everyone knows where you've been?" She says it in jest, partially, because his spend isn't *just* inside of her.

He smirks smugly, running a hand across her belly and breasts, where some of his spill is drying. "I may have gotten carried away."

"*Hm*. Indeed. Clean me, now."

Ivan scoffs with a roll of his eyes, but he does as she asks. He draws her a bath and carries her to it, sitting them both down inside the warm water.

He soaps her up and helps her wash, his large hands traveling over her body, massaging her in ways that nearly excite her again.

"Do you loathe it?" She asks, seeing the way his eyes glance over her pale hair.

He gives her a crooked smirk, sending prickles of awareness into her tired soul. Teasing her. "I don't mind it. It sort of gives the vibe of, like, fucking a stranger."

She rolls her eyes at him. "Pig."

Kissing her shoulder sweetly, he says, "I want you however you are. Hair color doesn't matter."

Alina mentally preens a little, because even when he's a pig, he can also be rather endearing.

Ivan's lips nibble across her bared neck, sending trickles of pleasure up and down her tired spine. He pauses, and Alina feels his heart beat a little faster, as if he's nervous about something. "Can I move in now? I've…you know I've wanted to move in for some time now."

The question doesn't exactly surprise Alina, but a part of her jolts in shock, hearing him voice his desire aloud. She's known. He told her, in the coach that one, awful afternoon that he wanted to live with her again, damn the consequences. The thing is, if Alina weren't already set on how her future is going to go, she wouldn't know how to answer this.

This level of commitment is nearly foreign to her, because living together in the same room in the Little Palace is real commitment. Not temporary. She and Aleksander always kept separate suites, for as long as they were together…but she also knows that Ivan was different.

He feels safe and secure when he lives with his partner. He wants to be close; he wants to be in the same bed every night, he doesn't want to feel like he might be displaced at any given moment.

Alina sighs…because it's now or never that she tells him the harsh truth. Harsh, because he may not agree with her…but it's the deepest commitment she can give him. She's going to give him the choice to be with her until the end of his days- or until he feels otherwise.

"Ivan…I have something important to tell you."

He goes still, nearly stop breathing, for a split second. He assumes it's nothing good, naturally. He assumes it's another rejection from her. His voice falls a bit. "…what is it?"

Firmly, not allowing herself to waver, Alina tells him the plans for her future. "I'm not staying here. My time in the Little Palace has ended."

His arms go tight around her and the bath water splashes around them as he stops lounging backwards. Ivan's chest is pressed tightly to her spine. "What do you mean? *Where are you going*?"

"Away," she breathes out. "To live my life freely. Without anything holding me back."

"Does Aleksander-"

"He knows," Alina interrupts. "He's letting me choose my own path. I choose to live life the way I always wanted to. So, to answer your question; you cannot move in with me *here*, in the Little Palace, because I will no longer be here."

"How long are you leaving for?"

"I don't really intend to move back here, if that answers it for you." Alina looks over her shoulder, wanting to see him, to reassure him. He looks a little lost, for so stony a man. "If you choose, you may come with me and my bed will be yours."

Something softens in his eyes as he realizes what she's saying. He kisses hers swiftly, adoringly. Then, he pulls away, staring off at the wall with a certain look of pain. "I have responsibility here that I can't just abandon…" his voice trails off unconvincingly.

Of course, he's already thinking of ways to follow her, while holding on to his ironclad duty.

She wants this to be his choice, because she believes in choice. If he doesn't want to give up his position as Head of the *Corporalki*, she won't make him…but she won't sacrifice her freedom either. Softly, she runs her hands up and down his thighs, to soothe him. "You can appoint someone else to take on your position. Or, let them vote. That's probably preferred. You've given enough of your life to war and to this place. *Retire*. It's what Fedyor would have wanted for you." *For us.*

He's thinking so hard that she can practically hear the wheels churning in his skull. He rests his forehead against the nape of her neck, eyes closed, his arms tight about her naked waist.

"They can vote," she tells him. "I think Olga will be a favorite, she's experienced and levelheaded and-"

Ivan sounds scandalized, voice echoing loudly in the bathroom. "But…she's a *healer!*"

Typical. Alina could almost laugh at his predictable disdain. "As I was saying, she's levelheaded. She will make fair decisions based on merit."

He goes quiet for some time, inhaling softly behind her ear, scenting her. Nibbling her ear, then sucking a brief love bite onto her jugular, he says, "Where will we go?"

…and just like that, he's decided.

Alina leans back against his chest and reaches back a hand to scrape her nails across his scalp fondly. "Home, I suppose."

Ivan turns her head towards his, pressing his lips to hers.

She can feel the way his cock grows firm at her back and she groans in disbelief against his lips. "Again?! I'm sore!"

One of his large hands rests over her abdomen, filling it with warmth, easing her tight, sore muscles. "I can fix that."

"…but I just got clean!"

He chuckles and she loves the sound.

---

---

When the day finally comes, Alina almost cannot believe that she finally gets to bid the Little Palace goodbye for as long as she wants.

Her decision. Her choice.

It's bittersweet and strange, the feeling inside of her. She learned how to use her powers here, she learned how to love, how to be betrayed, felt the keen sting of heartbreak and loss…and yet.

…and yet it's time for her to move on. To build a new chapter in her life. One of her own design.

Some of her newer acquaintances swing by as her belongings are being taken out to her coach. Karyna cries a little, asking if she can come visit; Alina tells her yes, naturally. Olga shakes her hand awkwardly, not very good with emotional displays.

She thanks Alina for giving her the opportunity to become the Head of the *Corporalki*.

The morning is bittersweet as more Grisha come to say goodbye.

It's almost a relief when Alina finally gets into her travel clothes and goes out to the coach, feeling the travel jitters taking over her. It's almost time. She's so close to returning to where her heart is, the place she feels at home-

Shadows creep up to her, hovering at her feet like ill omens, stopping Alina a few feet away from the coach.

She turns to look over her shoulder; Aleksander leans on his cane heavily, though looking handsome with his hair perfectly done, the exhaustion nearly missing from his features. One would almost think he was at full strength again, aside from the cane. Aside from the slight hint of pain in his eyes. It must be taxing him, to be outside.

"Aleksander," she says softly, a hint of fear curling inside of her. Has he come to tell her he's changed his mind?

"Alina."

Looking down at his shadows as they curl around her, Alina steels herself and lifts her chin. "Have you come to say goodbye?"

He chuckles drolly. "I wouldn't dream of it. No, goodbye is so *permanent*."

Something like relief falls over her and she allows his shadows to crawl up her legs, caressing her in their chill. "Eternity is a long time. I'm sure…that I'll visit."

Aleksander cocks his head, looking at her curiously. Calculation is in his dark gaze. "He's not forever, you know. The Sherborn bear gives him unnaturally long life and youth, but he isn't truly eternal like you and I." His eyes go serious, ominous as a forest in the middle of the night. "Do you comprehend what I'm saying to you, love?"

"I do." She steps forward to press the back of her hand to his cheek and he leans into it, a slight show of his humanity. "Someday, Aleks. Someday, I will find my way to your side again. But, when that day comes, it will be my choice. You understand it *has to be my choice*, or it will never work."

He sighs and the wind seems to sigh with him, curling through his lovely midnight hair. He looks disappointed, displeased, but somehow there is a strange sort of acceptance in his eyes. “I’m beginning to understand, actually. You are a complicated woman, Miss Starkov.”

Alina smiles, hearing him address her the way he used to, so long ago. She can almost imagine being that young, innocent girl once more, falling in love with him for the first time.

He gives her a pitying look, suddenly, after glancing over her shoulder. “It’s going to hurt. You are going to hurt and I cannot spare you this. But, I will be there to pick up the pieces, if you allow me. Loving mortals never ends well, my beloved.”

*Ah*. This again. She gives him a sad smile, squeezing his hand in hers. “It’s not about having forever; it’s about how that time is spent,” she utters softly, like a summer breeze through a midnight window. “I won’t have forever with him, but I want what remains.”

The Darkling sighs, as if pained by her words. “I do loathe hearing you say things like that.”

“You are so patient, Aleksander.” She leans up to kiss the corner of the Darkling’s mouth, well aware Ivan is scowling where he waits by their coach. Alina can feel his small science crawling inside of her now, possessive, a little jealous. “Wait a little longer for me, Aleksander.”

Inhaling the scent of her skin, the Darkling sighs, eyes flitting over to where his *formerly* favored Grisha is standing. “I can outlast him as well, I suppose.” Something unpleasant coils in his gaze. He blinks it away when he looks back at Alina. “Someday, we will see each other again…and I hope that by then, I can be a man that you can look at with admiration again.”

Something sad flickers in Alina’s eyes at that. “Please, stay out of trouble for me, will you? I don’t need to eradicate another Fold, Aleks. You can be a good man again. The glimpse of that man is who I loved, so long ago. If you find that part of yourself again…don’t push it away. For my sake.”

He kisses her one last time, full of sorrow and longing as she steps away. “Until next we meet, Miss Starkov.”

Her heart beats with the same sorrow and sadness, but it lifts with each step she takes away from him, away from the Little Palace.

It’s time for her to start her new life. Eventually, she’ll make her way back, but today is not that day.

Ivan pushes off the side of the coach where he’s been leaning dangerously, arms crossed over his chest. “Are we ready, your highness?” Sarcasm is in his voice, even as he helps her inside the coach gently.

“Oh, stop that.”

“What?” Ivan retorts, following her inside, the male scent of him filling the confined space quickly.

Alina inhales it deeply. “You’re giving me anxiety every time you look in my direction, Ivan. It was just a kiss!”

The coach jolts forward, taking them away on their next journey. “Well, I don’t like watching him kiss you.”

“Here we go again,” Alina says with exasperation, even thought she’s smiling at him. “Do you want to be convinced of my affection now or later?”

It takes a moment, but eventually he smirks, eyes going a little darker. “So eager for it, aren’t you?”

“What have I told you about that ego of yours?”

“I don’t know,” he drawls, pupils wide. “Why don’t you tell me again while you take off that hideous dress?”

“You…*excuse you*! Ivan!” She squawks indignantly.

The coach continues forward, the horses oblivious to the bickering within, heading only towards a sleepy town in West Ravka.

//////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////////

**END**

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** I want to thank you all for all the lovely support and the beautiful comments and the awesome kudos! Who knew that this story would become so big, when I literally intended for it to be 3 chapters long! I appreciate all of you soooooo much and I thank you for reading and coming on this emotional rollercoaster with me! I actually may come out with an Epilogue for this...so this may get updated again, but not this hot minute.

Also, I've been told I need to actually USE my tumblr...so I guess I'll do something with it. It's alive. You are able to ask me questions if you want in the ask me anything shiz or whatever **wine4thewin @ Tumblr**

Oh. And, finally cleaned up / edited most of the playlist for this fic series @ spotify if you want to see what on earth I was probably jamming to while working on this entire AU.

♥

If you're ever feeling the need for more reading:
Once More, But With Actual Feeling | This story is all the bonus scenes from this very fic. It will still likely get a few more updates even though it says complete at this time. There may be another Aleksander/Alina/Ivan threesome in the future in there LOL.

This Bed Has Three Sides | This is the dysfunctional polyamory, modern AU fic I'm working on right now, featuring Ivan/Fedyor/Alina and a delicious mix of their own unique relationships with each other. Not a darkfic for once (wtf, me not writing a darkfic?), more Slice of Life in nature with quite a bit of drama. Plus, rich ex-boyfriend Aleksander just waiting to swoop in and take his sunshine girl back...

I do have more Shadow & Bone fics on my profile, some are more tame than others! Happy reading! *big hugs to everyone*

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!